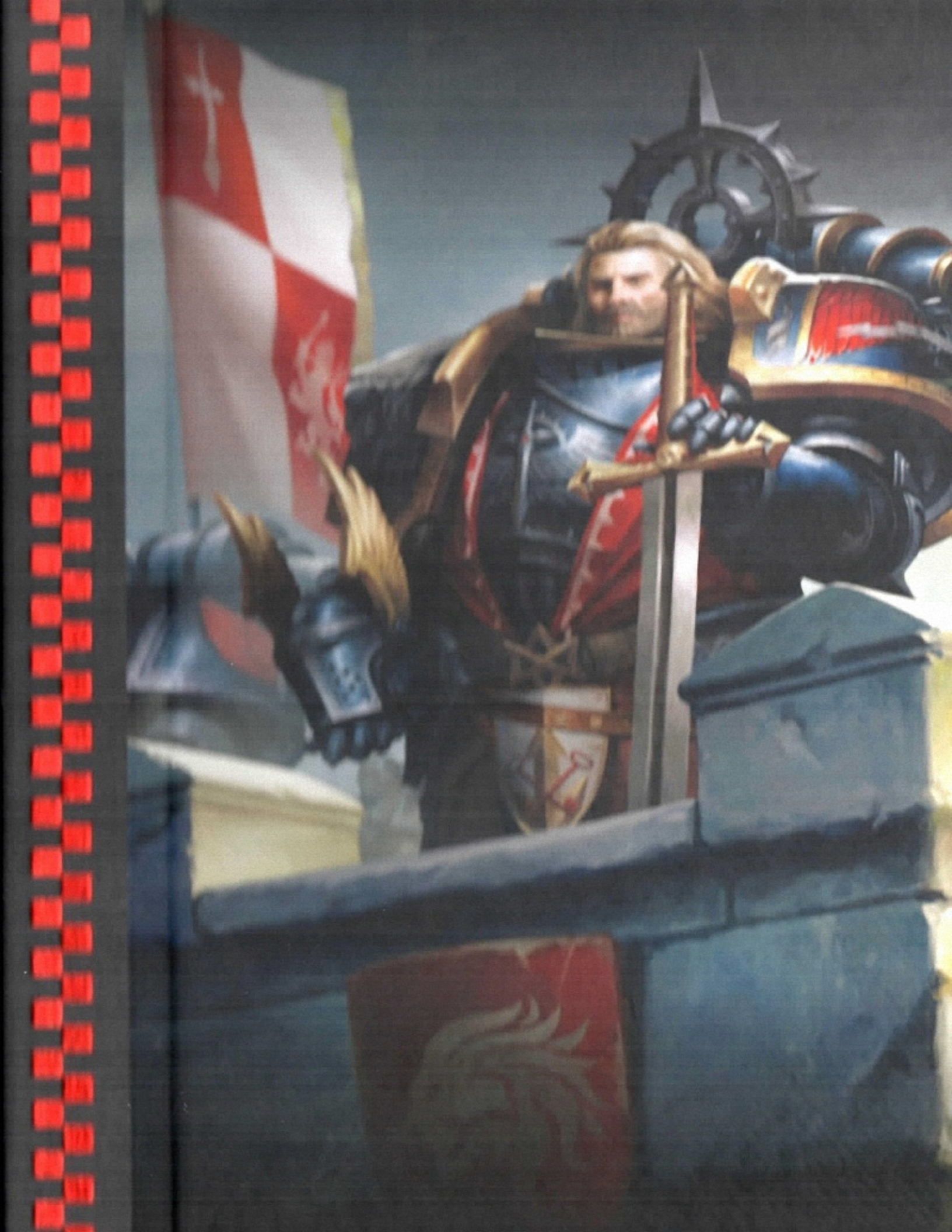

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PRIMARCHS

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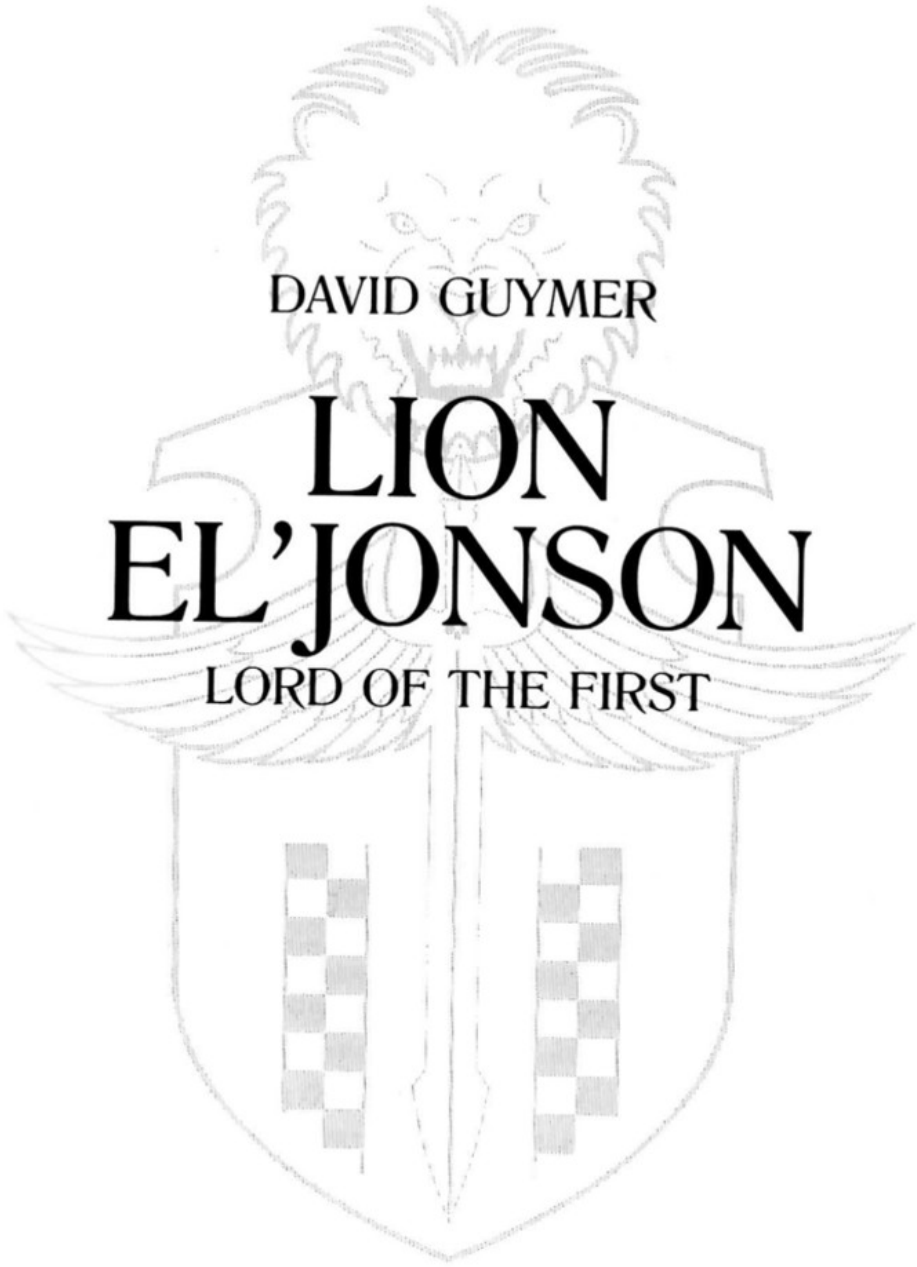

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LION EL'JONSON

LORD OF THE FIRST

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

Mighty heroes battle for the right to rule the galaxy. The vast armies of the Emperor of Mankind conquer the stars in a Great Crusade – the myriad alien races are to be smashed by his elite warriors and wiped from the face of history.

The dawn of a new age of supremacy for humanity beckons. Gleaming citadels of marble and gold celebrate the many victories of the Emperor, as system after system is brought back under his control. Triumphs are raised on a million worlds to record the epic deeds of his most powerful champions.

First and foremost amongst these are the primarchs, superhuman beings who have led the Space Marine Legions in campaign after campaign. They are unstoppable and magnificent, the pinnacle of the Emperor's genetic experimentation, while the Space Marines themselves are the mightiest human warriors the galaxy has ever known, each capable of besting a hundred normal men or more in combat.

Many are the tales told of these legendary beings. From the halls of the Imperial Palace on Terra to the outermost reaches of Ultima Segmentum, their deeds are known to be shaping the very future of the galaxy. But can such souls remain free of doubt and corruption forever? Or will the temptation of greater power prove too much for even the most loyal sons of the Emperor?

The seeds of heresy have already been sown, and the start of the greatest war in the history of mankind is but a few years away...

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IMPERATOR SOMNIUM

Lion El'Jonson had never seen his father's face.

Jaghatai Khan would describe it as weather-beaten and unsmiling, the face of one who had ridden under every sun and counted every blade of grass. Russ spoke of eyes that masked great depths of black humour as well as wisdom, whereas Vulkan, if moved by victory's bloody wake to melancholia, would tell of a countenance worn past expression by the cares of the galaxy, tanned and darkened by the hard toil of humanity's forge.

Theirs were vague descriptions, never beholden to detail. What color were His eyes? How tall was He? What mark, if any, did He bear upon His skin?

Meetings with the Master of Mankind were disorienting experiences, subject to the lassitudes of memory even to beings as mighty as His own sons.

The Emperor and the Lion met infrequently, and when the goings of the First Expedition and the Fourth allowed for a reunion they spoke but little. They were alike, father and son. More so, perhaps, than any of the Lion's brothers, for, whatever their view or wish on the matter, there was but one amongst them with claim to being His firstborn. What one wished to convey the other would know, often without the need for words. That which either felt best left unsaid would remain so. The Emperor withheld much. This the

Lion knew, though he did not begrudge Him His confidences. Equally, he did not begrudge the knowledge that no secret of his was unbeknownst to the Emperor.

‘Amon spoke to me of your great victory at Gorro, father,' said the Lion, eyes hooded, voice neutral.

'It was a victory,' said the Emperor. 'Greatness, however, is relative. Had you heard it from the Luna Wolves instead of my Custodes then it would have become greater again.'

'Cannot both be true?'

'There have always been those who would champion the merits of perception, instinct, or faith over Empirical Truth. But facts are immutable, regardless of who or what perceives them. Power will always belong to the one who knows them. To one accustomed to small triumphs, every victory is great. It is in my gift, and in yours, to see beyond.'

The Lion nodded, waiting, but the Emperor said nothing further.

‘Where would you have me go next?' said the Lion.

'Where you must.'

To the Lion, the Emperor appeared as a hooded figure, armoured in emerald plate, inscrutable with gilt and filigree and shrouded in robes of gold, wreathed in obscuring light.

Everything his brothers described was a mask.

Only the Lion beheld the truth.

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ONE

I

Norlev hated the ship.

He hated the high-frequency whine of her three hundred-year-old plasma combustors. He had barely slept since his transfer from the laser defense platforms on Muspel. Even with the ship at its geostationary low anchorage over the capitolis complex at Sheitansvar, which it always was, even when the reactors were only working to minimum power requirements, which they *always* were, Norlev could feel the trembling through the bulkhead beside his bunk. When he did manage to sleep he had bad dreams - dreams of shivering cold, claws on the other side of the metal - and he would rise less rested than he had begun. He hated that it was always too cold, and he hated that it was always too dark. He hated that the vox-satellites were still down. He hadn't been able to relay a message to Anastana and his sons in six months.

But most of all he hated the damned ship.

Her name was the *Obrin*. Together with another two dozen out-of-date warships and semi-derelicts, she had been left behind when the Crusade

fleet had moved on to brighter worlds. Much like Norlev. Had it been Norlev's decision he would have scrapped the lot and recycled the plans.

Maybe then the vox-satellites would be working.

Ignoring his crewmates in the armsmen's dormitory, Norlev walked straight for his locker.

He despised its utilitarian gunmetal finish, the squeak it made as it opened. As if mankind could bring light and reason to the galaxy, but not a tube of oil. The scuffed mirror on the door's inside winked as it crossed the light from the Iho-brown lumen strip, suspended in a nest of crash webbing and naked cables.

Norlev glanced into the mirror, his eyes widening momentarily before sliding across his reflection like a spotlight over smoke.

Behind him Yansliev and Valdimir sat in fold-down alum-frame chairs. Empty *ranka* glasses and coloured gaming tokens littered the screw-in table that folded down from the wall between them. In the bunk beside them, Gitr lay in the single cot, still fully clothed in a cadet's uniform and an unbuckled flak vest, having apparently forgotten to undress, staring blankly at the rivets in the ceiling. The local recruits were all like that. The planet was full of them. Norlev hated their bovine docility.

What angered him more, he realised, was that he was sure he was starting to notice the same placid traits in himself. An hour lost here, a half there, gazing at walls, overlooking the everyday jibes of his crewmates until it was too late to respond.

Reaching into the locker for his uniform, Norlev pulled on his belt. He drew the sidearm from the holster and checked the load. Voss-pattern Mark IV autopistol, a single box magazine, carrying thirty high-dispersal rounds.

'What're you doing, Norlev?'

Valdimir looked up from his game, his face so much like that of a drunken dog Norlev was surprised he didn't pant as well as drool. 'Red shift doesn't start for another six hours.'

'Not another kit inspection, is it?' said Yansliev, leaning across the table with the bottle to spill more oxide-red ranka over Valdimir's glass, drill or no drill.

By the Emperor, they were as much a disgrace to the uniform as the local mobs.

He closed the locker and turned around.

'*Gavnat*,' Valdimir swore. 'What's happened to your *face*?'

Norlev shot him between the eyes.

The flechette-burst shredded most of the officer's face as well as Yansliev's hand. The ranka bottle exploded. Yansliev screamed. Not at Norlev though. Not at the autopistol. At the bloodied claw of his hand. Bits of glass and flechette stuck out of it, glittering like an unwrapped gift under the swaying lumen strip. The association was a jarring one, from a time when Norlev had been able to feel, when he hadn't felt so... *different*, and something within him forced the recollection down. He fired again. Another half-second squeeze delivered fifteen rounds until there was nothing left of Yansliev's head but meat dripping from a wet skull.

Gitr was still lying in his bunk, still staring blankly, but this time at Norlev, or through him, as though he could see something wondrous written inside the back of his skull.

Something prompted Norlev to lower his weapon.

He did.

A whisper reached into his thoughts from beyond the void.

'Yes,' he murmured, like a man half asleep.

A distant star pulsed, as if for him alone, and he basked in the cold light of its approval.

'I know the way to the nearest armoury locker.'

Behind him Gitr turned back to the rivets in the ceiling, ignoring the blood on his cadet's uniform, as Norlev slotted a fresh magazine into his autopistol and stepped into the corridor.

* * *

II

'Take us in,' said Duriel. His voice was low, a habit of the forest, barely even registering to unaugmented ears as a whisper.

'Weapons?' said Stenius.

'Not yet.'

The *Invincible Reason* had achieved complete translation into the Muspel System approximately twenty-one hours previously, and had been decelerating for the last ten. Attended by a silent entourage of battleships,

cruisers and escorts, a splinter battlegroup of the Fourth Expedition Fleet sailing under the temporary, anonymous ident-colours of the 2003rd, she had made her long voyage from the darkness of the system Oort cloud under a cloak of secrecy. She had broadcast no transponder sequences or auto-identifier codes. She had made no attempt at hailing the planet's Imperial authorities. Only now, the planet a cloud-swathed blue orb filling their screens, did the command crew commence pre-fire rituals on the behemoth warship's void shield arrays and weapons systems.

The Lion, as was his custom, had shared little of the purpose behind this course, even with those whom rank and veterancy qualified as confidantes. Duriel, as was the custom of every Dark Angel, had spent the bulk of the last day-cycle catching up to his primarch's thinking.

'What in the Emperor's name is going on out there?'

Duriel, captain of the 12th Order, senior forge-wright and master of the Ironwing, castellan of the *Invincible Reason*, lowered the slate he had been studying. Plugged into the cogitation-dense instrumentarium of the Gloriana-class capital ship's primary command dais, the slate was superfluous, a prompt at best, an affectation at worst. If asked, he would say that he savoured the tactile experience of 'reading'. Even *if* his artificer harness had already in-loaded the data in bulk and dumped it via the connection nodes imbedded in his black carapace directly into his spinal column.

He was, as his tutors in the Emperor's forges of Narodnya and Manraga would often despair, as stuck in his ways as a five-millennia-old cogitator when he chose to be.

The Legion flagship's central dais was a rock of adamantium struts and insulated cabling, buffeted from all sides by a sea of system noise and glittering lights. To stand there and listen, to actually listen, was to lose oneself to a seethe of warring linguistic forms. Mortal human crewmen whispered to one another in Gothic, both low and High, impenetrable technical jargon and a plethora of dialects from a score of disparate worlds. Cogitators issued binharic clicks, heavily accented with the numeral-forms of their Terran, Martian and Jovian birthplaces. Red-robed machine-priests muttered in the harsh sing-song of lingua-technis. Armoured legionaries, stationed about the deck like angelic statuary, addressed one another curtly in Legion battle-cant or in any one of the dozens of Calibanite languages

officially codified *lingua mortis* by the census takers of the Great Crusade.

Duriel, and in the absence of the Lion perhaps only Duriel, could follow it all.

He was not sure if his talent for language was one he had possessed before his ascension to the ranks of angels, for the opportunity to discover it had never arisen in the forest encampment in which he had lived as a child. He had not then met a man to whom he was not related, much less heard one speak another language, before the Legion recruiter had come to take him to Aldurukh.

The bridge's cathedral-like ceiling was paned with sloping plates of armourglass, ultra-hard and toughened with void frost, baring the deck to the scattered lights of the void. Only a handful of stars were visible. The rest had been bleached out by the albedo of the bright, blue-green crescent that was their destination.

Muspel.

Duriel felt ihe nape of his neck prickle, the way it once had when something he was not yet consciously aware of stalked him through the trees.

'What do you see out there, lord?' he murmured to himself, at a register below even his habitual whisper.

'What do they say, brother?' said Farith Redloss, nodding towards the slate in Duriel's hand. As master of the Dreadwing his rank and Duriel's were technically equal, but aboard the *Invincible Reason*, the additional title of castellan gave Duriel sovereignty. Though Redloss called him brother, he posed his question with the due respect.

'Little that I am at liberty to share.'

Redloss grunted, but pressed no further.

Duriel smiled, his planned response interrupted by the frustrated burr of a Mechanicum priest below the main dais, struggling again with the command systems' Himalazian base code.

The forge-wrights of the Ironwing were, insofar as Duriel knew, a unique brotherhood amongst the legiones Astartes, serving as a parallel and independent reservoir of machine lore to that provided by the Legion's Techmarines. Following in the footsteps of their earliest forebears, they learned their arts from the engineSires and artisan-lords of the Throneworld's ancient forges - the very same forges that, long after they

had tutored the antecedents of the First Legion in machinecraft, would go on to host Fulgrim and Vulkan and Ferrus Manus. The First Legion as a whole, too, still received the bulk of its consumables and equipment from Terra rather than from any of the forge worlds that had been swallowed up by the growing Imperium - much to the occasional chagrin of the Expedition's vestigial Mechanicum complement. Regardless of how far the Expedition journeyed from the Throneworld, however many times it had split and split again, this preference had remained in place. To most outsiders who had served prior terms of service on other Expedition vessels, the experience of a First Legion warship was one, initially at least, of horror, spent wondering how any craft as complicated as a Gloriana could function without a horde of crimson robes beetling about its interiors. The truth was that the forge-wrights and Techmarines were capable of tending to all but the most arcane and intemperate of their technologies themselves, and did so.

Duriel was the master of a select order, a caretaker of its secrets as much as its technologies, and even he was not privy to why any of this should be so.

He had his theories.

He scratched thoughtfully at his beard, his hand un-gauntleted but sheathed in signus rings and digital lasers. It was a mortal habit that, he knew, brought his brothers in the Council of Masters no shortage of amusement.

It makes you look like a peasant, Griffayn of the Firewing had once said.

'What can you tell us?' said Stenius. The courtly, Calibanite manner of speaking whilst actually saying little was one that many of the older Terrans in the Legion found irritating. Stenius, though he masked it as well as any lord of Caliban, was assuredly one of them.

Duriel frowned at the slate in his hand.

'123997.M30. Two Chartist ships lost in the warp en route to Muspel. 125997.M30. A Mechanicum ark transiting the subsector is forced into an emergency translation. It isn't heard from again, presumed lost with all hands. 129997.M30. The first brigade of Muspellian irregulars is lost in its entirety, five thousand men-at-arms, in transit to a training exercise aboard the Muspel XII astropaihic relay station. No reasons given and no trace of the missing conveyor and its escorts is ever found. 131997.M30. A fire

aboard one of the orbital substations effectively cuts off nine-tenths of the planet from vox and auspex coverage. That was six months ago. It still hasn't been repaired. A rash of accidents among the resident Mechanicum, apparently. And the transport that was supposed to be bringing in a fresh detachment along with a strengthened skitarii detail is months overdue.'

'You make it sound like the Bermudan Tryptych,' said Stenius.

'The what?' said Redloss.

'An old Terran myth,' Duriel explained. Stenius looked at him, surprised. 'The libraries of Manraga were well conserved, brother, and its masters encourage broader study.'

'There are no oceans left on Terra,' said Stenius, 'and yet we still tell ourselves tales of captains driven mad and ships lost without trace.'

'Humans will always need their ghost stories,' said Duriel. 'It was the Ninth that brought this world to compliance, was it not?'

'The original inhabitants of Muspel had regressed into a stale of savagery,' said Redloss. 'Barbarians, squatting in the ruins of Dark Age cities, crying out for the primitive gods that had abandoned them. According to Sanguinius' own writings the native populace was entirely passive, not a trace of choler in its humours at all.'

'The Ninth didn't find even a single weapon,' said Stenius. 'Not so much as a flint axe.'

Redloss crossed his arms over the broad curve of his breastplate. 'I've never seen anything like it anywhere.'

'By every iterator's account, the Blood Angels left the world perfectly compliant,' said Stenius.

A tectonic rumble passed through the command deck superstructure, and a burst of thrust from the Invincible Reason's colossal drives slowed her for the final half-million-kilometre coast into the planet's orbital fleet anchorages. Across the low wall of display panes that encircled the dais Duriel could see the icons of eighteen night-black battleships as they joined the flagship in her deceleration. Their actual appearance, as glimpsed through the flagship's crystalflex screens, was far less ordered or majestic. A positional thruster out of alignment. The faintest wobble in bearing. The oily shimmer of rolling shield blackouts. Others were missing sensor masts, or looked as though they had faced down an asteroid and lost. The scars of Rangda were fresh on all of them. And not just the ships. Only the Lion

himself knew the true toll that the third and final xenocide had taken on the Legion. It was a burden he chose to bear alone. Duriel sighed.

They would always be the First, envied and admired by all, but the X, the XIII, the XVI, even the XVII in spite of their own setbacks, all threatened to surpass them in strength and in deed now.

But they had done their duty.

The Dark Angels always did their duty

'I wish I knew what we were doing here,' Stenius muttered, interrupting his commander's reverie. 'The warp claims its share of shipping, and some regions have always been more treacherous than others. A few hundred die-hard malcontents intent on disruption is only to be expected on a newly compliant world, even one as ostensibly peaceable as Muspel, whatever the Ninth claims.'

Duriel gestured towards the peaceful pirouette of void-anchored ships in the crystalflex, a pair of semi-retired heavy cruisers wearing a collage of obsolete heraldries; a handful of destroyers and corvettes, all drifting in near-total EM-silence. A couple of the lighter escorts were signalling contradictory distress codes, one engine fire and one full-blown mutiny, but the rest were eerily quiet.

'Does this not seem amiss to you, brother?'

'This is beneath us,' said Stenius. 'Unless it's the Lion's intention to bring slight upon the Angel.'

'*That is beneath you, my son.*'

The three knights turned. Stenius blanched and dropped to one knee, head bowed, chin to his plastron. The command deck's titanic blast doors ground into the receiving blocks as Lion El'Jonson, primarch of the First Legion, swept up the ascent ramp to the dais.

Huge in his intricately crafted harness of powered plate, a gift from the Emperor Himself, the Lion was an enigma to the laws of reality, somehow achieving the feat of being larger, *greater*, than the mighty Gloriana that conveyed him. Gilt scrollwork decorated the curved black ceramite, ornate reliefs depicting forest scenes. At one hip, the artificer edge of the *Lion Sword* rested in a sheath artfully fashioned to evoke folded leaves. In a holster worn from the other was the *Fusil Actinaeus*. The Emperor alone knew how many lives of human, xenos and sentient Al it had terminated since its conception in the Dark Age of Technology, before He had

consigned it to the bottomless vaults of the First Legion's armouries. But it had found a fitting home in the left hand of the secular enlightenment's foremost god of war.

The Lion moved as a predator moves through the forest, all about him hush and stillness as he swept his fur-edged cloak from behind him and took his seat in the carved wooden command throne. His majesty went beyond mere physical stature, his brooding presence alone enough to cow a hall of proud transhuman knights. The Lion was warrior above all other warriors. Seventeen brothers he may have had, but that was far from an acknowledgement that any had been made even remotely equal or that the Lion of Caliban was not the most singular of beings.

Drawing a crown of dark ceramite from his head, allowing his long mane of russet-gold hair to fall across over his shoulders, he leaned forward, eyes the same brutal green of Caliban's forests taking in two dozen display panes all at once. The Dark Angels were capable of swift and incisive action, but in every endeavour, in peace or in war, it was the unseen hand of the Lion that guided them, providing for each of his sons a piece of the larger picture that he and he alone could see.

The universe waited on his word.

He made it wait.

'Board those ships,' he said, a voice so authoritative it could never have been mistaken for human.

'Which ones, Sire?' said Duriel.

'All of them.'

* * *

III

Aravain reached up into the cargo netting in the overhead space, carefully hanging the bundle of dried leaves and seed cones. When he pulled his hands away, the scent on his gauntlet was that of another world, a dark and hateful world, a world that had never wished anything for Aravain and his kind but the bloodiest of deaths. He closed his eyes and drew breath, and for the briefest of moments the reek of promethium and the howl of turbofans pitched for vertical uplift was no more. In its place, the lethal, still-wild dignity of the mountainous Northwilds, his home, still reigned. He

opened his eyes, allowing the launch bay klaxons and engine noise to again pass his mental guard. The simple charm he had set bounced and turned on its wire as the rest of the squad trouped up the boarding ramp. He made a quick sign in the air, the emerald leaves of his psychic hood breathing the ice-cold winds of Mount Sartana over the nape of his neck, as he mouthed a prayer against the dangers of the void.

'Brother-knights,' barked the squad sergeant as he came last up the ramp.

His name, *Kaye*, had been etched in curving filigree into the edgework of his armour, the plasteel oiled and lapped to a dark mirror-shine. An elaborate hierarchy of symbols identified him as a knight of the Third Order, 15th Company, commander of Tactical Squad 'Martlet'. The emblem of the Stormwing was etched into his breastplate. And it appeared again, more discreetly, alongside the unit markings on his right pauldron, together with a deliberately obtuse arrangement of subordinate sigils that denoted rank in the parallel echelons of the hexagrammaton. Each new examination of his armour revealed heraldic icons of secret orders more obscure even than these, enfolded within leaf and laurel motifs.

He drew a long, cross-hilted Calibanite warblade from its sheath.

'On the eve of battle, we give reverence.'

The squad sergeant turned his sword point down to the gunship's deck plates and then went to one knee, his battleplate purring as he lowered his brow to the crosspiece. The Dark Angels crowding the troop aisle similarly took the knee, swearing on blades and bolters.

The mortal woman already strapped into her too-large restraints reached instinctively for the confiscated imager unit that should have been in her satchel. From the corner of his eye Aravain saw her frown in annoyance.

'For the Lion and Caliban,' Kaye declared.

'For the Lion and Caliban,' came the rejoinder.

The sergeant rose with a whirr of servo-assisted knee joints as the rest of the squad backed into their restraint harnesses.

Aravain found himself directly opposite the woman. *Savin*, Kaye had called her. She flashed him a nervous smile, which he ignored. Kaye banged his fist on the roof, reaching over the high rim of his gorget to manually vox-click a ready signal to the cockpit. The shriek of the turbofans redoubled in intensity. The human woman muttered her own prayer as the hatch swung up to mute the launch bay din and locked. Aravain's long

moustaches obscured a thin smile. Her carefully secular phrasing, even in the midst of prayer, amused the cynic in him. That she was diligent enough to use it even whilst in the grip of fear of what was to follow spoke of an inner courage that impressed him. Despite the conspicuous medicae armband and flak vest that she wore for protection, the woman was clearly one of the remembrancers that had joined the Expedition fleet in the decades after Perditus. The Dark Angels were not the XVI or the III, whose embrace of the new order seemed to speak of poor taste, a boorish deSire to have one's achievements celebrated beyond the ranks of brotherhood, but that hadn't stopped a persistent and self-assured handful from trying.

The allure of the First, he supposed.

He closed his eyes, blotting out external noise, preparing himself to spend the minutes of void flight in meditation.

'Is it normal for a Legion combat squad to be accompanied by one of its Librarians?'

He gritted his teeth, eyes still closed. 'No.'

'What's the significance of that... fetish you put in the ceiling?'

Aravain said nothing, and the woman fell mercifully quiet. With a lurch the Thunderhawk lifted from its landing block, pirouetting on its slab-hulled axis towards the launch bay doors. The woman murmured. The gunship shuddered into forward motion. The sudden shift in velocity barely affected the enhanced humours of a Legiones Astartes legionary, but the remembrancer gripped the harness straps as though she feared she might be thrown into space.

'Why... would the Lion... accept an... imagist... onto... his... ship... and then... deny her... her... imager?'

'Who can say?’

Unlike the human woman's, Aravain's vocal cords were scarcely perturbed by the gunship's vibrations.

'What... do you... think... we're going to... find... over there?'

Trigaine, Kaye's direct subordinate, chuckled as the rest of his brothers fitted helmets and performed last-minute checks on their weapons.

'I don’t know about you, my brothers, but I'm still hoping for orks.'

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TWO

I

Norlev spun and sprayed the passage behind him with auto-fire, just as the ship's armsman charged into view.

No.

Before he charged into view.

Flechettes scraped and banged the uncladded ductwork, riddling the trooper's tough flak vest and helmet, ripping through the unprotected limbs.

The trooper slid down the bulkhead, a gore-sodden heap.

Norlev ducked back behind a plasteel pavise, one of several deliberate projections designed to provide rolling cover for the *Obrin's* crew in the event of a firefight, as a blaze of auto-fire came back at him.

Again, he was certain that he had pulled back a half-second *before* he had registered the second trooper's presence.

He leant out of cover and fired back at her, but the autopistol's range fell way short of the trooper's heavier autogun and the result was an eruption of friction sparks from the bulkheads. There was an explosive crump about a hundred metres down the hall as the detonation packs he'd hidden in the

walls went off. The lights to the entire corridor, to the entire deck blinked out as the conduit bundles running down from the reactors were devoured by a small and furiously short-lived sun.

Norlev sprang from cover while the trooper was still distracted by the explosion and the sudden darkness. He swung the automatic shotgun he had liberated from the armoury locker to his chest and fired. The report thundered through the choke point, a muzzle flare like the discharge of a photon flash grenade in the dark, and the trooper was punched off her feet. The flare faded. Darkness again moved in. To Norlev's curious absence of surprise, he found he could still see. Every surface shimmered, painted in starlight.

'Fix lamps!'

The shout came from the passage behind him.

Norlev whirled about as a trio of lumen beams stabbed from the next intersection. A powerfully built man-at-arms in rigid flak armour dazzled him with a lumen beam across the eyes.

'I have him, sir!' the trooper yelled, already barrelling forwards.

No time to swing his shotgun around, Norlev leapt from cover to meet the charge head-on.

The trooper stabbed at him, the lumen beam immediately followed by the gleaming point of a bayonet. Norlev knocked the blade aside on the heavy stock of his shotgun, then kicked the armoured trooper in the gut. There was a crack, like broken pottery, and the soldier flew a metre down the corridor. Norlev bent backwards, almost parallel to the deck plates, as a blizzard of auto-fire hammered across him. Another man raced forwards. Norlev whipped upright. A shock maul crackled towards him, cooking off the recycled oxygen in the ship's atmosphere into a smoke-trail of ozone as it swung. It hit his shoulder with a sound like thunder. Norlev barely felt it. He grabbed the horrified trooper by the throat with his uninjured arm and twisted, slamming the now-dead man twice against the wall before leaving him to slide down to the deck.

A wild burst of auto-fire drove him back to the bulkhead, pressing flat to the naked plasteel of a bracing column. The lumen beam at the other end of the fusillade bobbed like a firefly in a bell jar as the last trooper hastily withdrew.

As the light vanished around the intersection, Norlev felt his shoulder

where the shock maul had hit. His fatigues were moist. His fingers came away red.

'I barely feel it,' he mumbled.

The pulse of an inhuman intellect threaded through his thoughts.

'I just killed four armsmen.' He shuddered, sick, looking down at his hand. 'Single-handed.'

A distant force pushed against his mind.

'The mag-lifts,' he said, 'yes.'

The petals of infinity unfurled.

'I understand.'

Walking to the intersection that the fifth trooper had fled down, Norlev turned ninety degrees on his heel and went the other way.

Something was already there.

Norlev snapped his shotgun around, but, for the first time since he had felt compelled to walk into the officers' dormitory and blow out Valdimir's brains, he fell resistance on the trigger. The thing wore the tattered shape and uniform of a junior officer, hunched over, oddly jointed. Black veins marbled its face and hands. Its eyes were holes punched through the materium of realspace, flecked with alien stars, wreathed in flame. He felt his weapon being lowered. The officer-thing did the same, as if it were some hellish reflection of himself. Thoughts passed between them, unimpeded by the baseline matter of Norlev's physical brain. All he took from the exchange were feelings. Uncertainty. Frustration. Fear. Turning to anger.

Heart pounding, breath hot, Norlev squeezed the barrel of his shotgun tight and brought it up.

He blinked.

He was alone.

He turned to look over his shoulder, but the officer-thing was gone.

As though recalling something from a dream, Norlev touched his face, feeling the marbled ridges where sclerotic black veins stood over his own limp, cold flesh.

Screams and the hard chatter of auto-fire rang out from the intersection behind him and Norlev turned towards it, but the pressure on his brainstem intensified, any suggestion of an encounter with an other already sinking into the abyss of memory. Instead, he relented to the pressure, allowed the

foreign will to direct him on towards the mag-lift terminus.

Left. Right. Right. Another left. The *Obrin* was a maze and deliberately so, but Norlev knew every turn.

A dread premonition came upon him as he hurried down the passageway. A moment later it was followed by a hum, a vibrating pain as though all his teeth were slowly working their way free of his gums. A heavy thud rang through the deck plates, then again, a giant's tread. Goaded onwards, Norlev broke into a run, shotgun swaying from the hip, as premonition became reality.

A man. Three metres tall. Encased in slabs of black armour that growled with an unholy animus of its own. Its face, in the utter dark, was a distorted mask of extrasensory perception and grizzled internal lighting.

'Legiones Astartes,' Norlev muttered, understanding now the uncertainty he had felt in the alien voice before.

The myriad possibilities of the infinite focused on one destructive purpose.

'Yes,' he snarled in answer.

He opened up with his shotgun before the giant transhuman had a chance to react to his presence. The shot scattered off the warrior's battleplate as though he had thrown a bag filled with nails, ricocheting around the confined corridor and filling the darkness with flying sparks. He fired again, advancing on the legionary, the weapon's autoloader spitting out shell after shell. It was like throwing gravel at a tank. The Space Marine did not attempt to find cover. He did not even adjust his pace. Utterly unhurried, he look aim and then fired. The single high-explosive shell, designed for cracking the armour of abhuman giants, xenos abominations, and anything a hostile galaxy could throw against the martial ingenuity of mankind, detonated in Norlev's stomach.

Blackness took him.

When he came to, moments later, he was propped against the bulkhead, staring up at the ceiling plates. He looked down. A pebbly intestinal smear spread across the deck plates towards a pair of dripping lumps of meat that might once have been legs.

The legionary did not even break stride. Marking Norlev as dead, he trod in the puddle of viscera, semi-intact loops of intestine bursting under his enormous weight as he clumped past.

'You can tell Trigaine, brother,' the warrior said, his deep voice doubled

and distorted by the crackle of an open vox-link. 'It's not orks.'

The legionary disappeared down the corridor, the rhythmic *hiss-stamp* of powered boots locking and releasing.

Norlev blinked - suddenly, irresistibly drowsy. 'Legiones Astartes,' he muttered in answer to the urgent flicker of life from the deep void of his brain. He closed his eyes. The Emperor's Angels are here. They aren't supposed to be here.' For some reason, their presence over his world made him angry. 'Yes,' he murmured, eyelids flickering, the life ebbing from him despite the best efforts of a faraway power to stem its flow.

'A new plan. I understand..'

II

Aravain came to a dead stop in the corridor.

The Thunderhawk gunship had docked exactly forty-one minutes previously in the *Obrin's* old, long-rusted flight bay. From there. Squad Martlet had done what the Legiones Astartes had been engineered to do. and what the Dark Angels did better than any other. Kaye had moved swiftly to seize the destroyer's command deck, while Trigaine had single-handedly taken and held the enginarium. The remaining three knights had. simultaneously, set about dissecting the vessel's labyrinthine interior in an aggressive search pattern, flushing out and gunning down any and all suspect force they encountered. Their respective actions were carried through with such intensity and speed that would-be insurrectionists had little chance of melting back into the crew before the swift blade of the Emperor's retribution struck them down.

Aravain, meanwhile, had followed his own hunter's instincts.

His visor enhancements rinsed the gore-stricken rust of the passageway a deep, penumbral green. The rune markers in the subscreen above his left eye marked the positions of Squad Martlet as they carved up the old picket ship between them. The heavy percussion of bolter fire snarled from its deep and ancient bowels.

And yet Aravain closed his eyes.

He fell something. A psychic staining. The way the shadow of a world might betray it as it transited across its parent sun. He ran his fingers down the wall, gauntlet ceramite bumping on the gaps and rivets, the dents left in

the metal by bolt shrapnel and flechette rounds.

Withdrawing his hand slowly, he reached up to disengage his helmet's seals. The displays and the visual enhancements winked off, darkness and the stench of blood and fetor spilling under the broken seals. His nose wrinkled. It reminded him of a time when he had been a boy, playing at hunting in the copses beyond the walls of his father's castle. He had come upon a week-old corpse that some predator had left at the walls to rot. The last of the Great Beasts had been exterminated by the Lion's crusades decades before Aravain had been born, but there had always been monsters in the forests of Caliban and there always would be, even after the forests were no more - creatures that killed as much out of malice as from hunger.

At the sound of retching, Aravain turned and looked down.

The remembrancer, Savine, crouched over the remnants of a Muspellian fleet auxilia armsman. His navy-blue staff uniform was stained a dark purple with the volume of blood it had absorbed, bits of him were smeared across the passageway, walls and floor. A lot of it was on Aravain's boots.

Savine had a lamp pack strapped to the side of her head, another around her wrist. The two beams framed a blanched face as her hand went to her open mouth.

"I... I... I should have my imager.'

Ignoring her, Aravain turned his attention to the eviscerated remains. Something in his mind niggled as he studied them, a whisper from across time and void. Undra-sul he murmured, he frowned, pushing the whisper of a foreign voice out of his thoughts, a cold mist rising off the weave of his psychic hood like a dawn fog.

Stand away from it, remembrancer.'

'Merciful Throne,' She reached out to touch the prominent black veins on the corpse's cheeks. 'What happened to his face?'

'He has come into contact with a xenos contaminant of some kind.'

Savine recoiled, wiping her palm on her flak vest. 'A xenos pathogen?'

Subvocally activating the vox-unit in his gorget ring, Aravain opened a second, discrete channel to the *Invincible Reason*.

'*Cruciatum*,' said the voice on the frequency, its identity masked by distortion, speaking the expected code phrase.

'I have a body. Ensure that Chief Librarian Elikas and Firebringer Griffayn are appraised. Have them dispatch a medicae unit to collect it.' He turned to

the remembrancer. She was staring at the corpse. 'You will await their arrival here, remembrancer, and return with them when they leave.'

There was a split-second’s hesitation during which Aravain reaffixed his helmet before the remembrancer answered. 'You're leaving me here?'

'You will be quite safe. This portion of the ship has been pacified and my brothers will be here momentarily. Other duties call me back to the flagship at once.'

'I understand... There has been a...' Again, she hesitated, mouth working slowly as she stared at the ruined corpse in front of her. '...a new plan.'

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THREE

I

'*Savine*.'

Her mind had been running at light speed since the medicae had bundled her aboard their Stormhawk gunship. Things she hadn't thought about in years. An itinerant childhood in the Hagriphone Sector. Her mother a concert flutist of some regional fame. Her father an armsman on a Chartist hauler. Her earliest memory was of curling up under the engine outlet feeds, comforted by the vibrations of the pipes. After that, settling down. A home in a new settlement prefab on Drellesdere. A brightly coloured house on a dusty, drably coloured world. The smell of amasec and obscura.

Her father turning bitter. She remembered getting older, falling in with bad friends, a riot in the Imperial commercia in protest of another tax that she couldn't remember now. Two nights in a cold municipal enforcer's cell. Then more of the same.

A funeral, the world still drab.

The images skipped by and away from her almost as soon as she could glimpse them, as though someone sifted through the yellowed hard copy of

her thoughts.

'*Savine*.'

She had calmed down after that, ditched the friends, applied to the art scholam in the principia. It was what her father would have wanted and her mother's connections made the interview process a formality. She had gone on to study imagery. An internship with the planetary newscast. A permanent secondment with Battlegroup Tarsius, a bucket corvette called *Remorseless*, the home she hadn't realised she'd missed, reporting to the sectoral offices of the War Council on the early skirmishes of what would soon escalate into the Ullanor Crusade.

Hearing of the remembrancer corps for the first time.

Something external to her own thoughts drilled deeper into the memory.

Yes, her thoughts said. *This one.*

A friend from the art scholam had contacted her while Tarsius was hunting down greenskin supply bases in the Vespion-Ultriedes intersystem gulfs. Her mind groped for the name, long ago forgotten. Bespell. Harriet Bespell. She had gone on to become a composer with the Imperial Symphonia, scoring the planetary anthems of more newly compliant worlds than most Expedition fleets had conquered in the two hundred years of the Great Crusade. In fulsome terms, her letter had detailed her latest posting as a remembrancer to the XV Legion.

For all the rumours that Savine had heard around the various dry-docks and officers' mess-decks about the Thousand Sons' practice of inscrutability, she'd still envied Harriet Bespell her position. Emperor help her, she envied her more now. Harriet Bespell had had it easy.

Yes.

More.

She felt her body - wherever it was now, far from any part in this - wince, but couldn't keep her mind from following that awful thought in its natural traitorous continuation.

She admired the Dark Angels. Of course she did. Even Horus did, if you could believe everything you heard. What kind of a person would she be if she didn't?

When, after months of petitioning, she had been invited aboard the *Invincible Reason* she had written to just about everyone she had ever known. Her mother. Her old commandant in the War Council news corps.

Her handlers on the *Remorseless*. And, of course, Harriet bloody Bespell.

As far as she knew, there were only a handful of remembrancers attached to the entire Legion. And she was one of them, right at the heart of it, the envy of everyone she had ever known and keen to let them know it.

It hadn't lasted.

The problem was, *as far as she knew* wasn't very far at all.

No one talked aboard a Dark Angels ship. No one questioned. When legionaries did leave their cloisters to walk the halls they did so hooded and robed, so it was virtually impossible for any human to tell one from another. Even when she did manage to approach one they would tell her almost nothing: sometimes even getting their name and rank felt like prising the darkest secret in the Imperium from its sworn protectors. When they conferred amongst themselves they did so in code, their words steeped in metaphor and literary allusions which neither she, nor any library archive she had been granted access to, had been able to decipher.

Not once had she laid eyes on the Lion.

'*Savine*.'

She hated them.

The self-revelation chilled her, but it was the truth, and incontestable. She hated them.

‘Savine!’

Corporal Domnil Vargha, a medicae detachment of the 24th Claristan Grenadiers, human auxilia to the recently formed 2003rd Expedition Fleet, shook her.

'What?' she said, recognising the faint slur in her own voice.

'Are you all right?'

'Of course I'm all right,’ she snapped, irritable suddenly, as though an enforcer had just come up behind her and caught her in possession of a libertarian pamphlet. 'How long until we...' She trailed off as she looked up, past the corporal's barrel, flak-sheathed torso to the empty benches either side of the gunship’s lowered exit ramp. ’Dock?’ she finished.

'You've been staring at the wall for about fifteen minutes.' said Domnil, lowering himself to one knee and fishing a penlight from his medicae satchel. He flashed it in her eyes.

She grunted, twisted her head away.

'Fifteen minutes?'

'I counted.'

The corporal took her wrist in a tight grip, silently counting her pulse while looking intently into her eyes. 'Your pulse is slightly elevated, your pupils dilated. Your skin feels a little warm. It’s possible you contracted something aboard the *Obrin*. Given what happened over there I think we should probably have a proper physicae check you over.'

A recollection of the medical bay's tertiary and quaternary annexes swam through her mind. Her first day aboard, a bored-looking attending officer had escorted her for a full physical workup and a battery of vaccinations that had left her stricken with nausea and bedridden for a week.

Go.

She shook her head.

An image of the corpse she had encountered aboard the *Obrin* formed in her mind like a constellation, along with a fathomless deSire to be there.

'The primary medical bay is a secure area,' she murmured, to herself. 'It's off-limits to everyone except Legion officers and authorised medicae personnel.'

'What do you want in the primary...' The corporal froze as Savine's pupils flicked up to snare his. His features slackened, as though all the mortal animus that was required to maintain his expression was leaching away. Savine felt something she could neither speak of nor name wriggle out from her eyes and into his. '...medical bay.' He blinked, confused. Then he stood, closing his medicae satchel, and turned on his heel.

'Yes,' he said.

II

Jesrin Siri, administrator secundus, stumbled through the forest of subscreens and desks of his post at strongpoint 1025/lambda and pulled up a plastek frame chair.

1025/lambda was not a name that inspired images of glory or alluded immodestly to its own importance but it was, he would often remind himself, a crucial location. Positioned centrally along the dorsoventral spine, the twenty-eight-kilometre-long grand processional ran from stern to bow, it was the main checkpoint for the passage of men and machines crossing from one half of the ship to the other. Legionary officers were

beyond mortal curfew, but a million men and women served on the *Invincible Reason* and thousands of them crossed 1025/lambda every hour as they went about their respective duties. When they did, their transit authorizations, ident wafers, order papers and subdermal signum pips needed to be scanned and verified. This was largely automated. High-grade servitors encased in polished metal, outfitted with subtle First Legion devices bearing the manufactory stamp of the Ural forges, issued dozens of authorisations every second. To the men and women of 1025/lambda went the, he humbly conceded, critical work of aiding and supervising the marvelous First Legion machines.

Drawing himself up to his desk, Jesrin pulled on a headset. He stared blankly at the screen for what the in-built work-chrono informed him was several minutes, wincing at the urgent scratching inside his head.

'Are you all right, Jesrin?' Munrane sat in the next booth over. Only the moon-pale skin of her face was visible, the dark green Legion auxilia uniform and the wire tangle of her headset blending seamlessly into the gloom. 'The medicae liaison said you were going to be off-duty for two more days.'

Jesrin's gaze drifted back to his screen. He could not remember when, how or why the urge to check himself out of the medicae wards had struck him, only that it had. It was only a touch of fever and a headache, after all.

'Too much to do,' he muttered.

'We'll cope without you for two days,' Munrane snorted.

'Too much to do,' Jesrin repeated, staring into his screen, hypnotised by its pixelated buzz.

Far too much to do.

III

The Arvus-B, IR-7755, wobbled through the magnetic shear. It was nothing the peri-orbital had not endured a thousand times before. Another man might have drawn pride from such selfless and repeated service to the Legion, but Pilot Tercio Raylan MqGan was not such a man. He sat at the co-pilot's controls with crossed arms and pouted lip, a billion-kilometre stare breaching the forward armourglass as their supply lighter crossed the coherence field and set down in its allotted berth.

'Hangar control, this is IR-7755,'said Raylan. 'Requesting debarkation.'

'*Request received, IR-7755,'* came the tinnily distant voice of the *Forest Sepulchre*. '*You may commence debarkation.*'

'Confirmed, *Forest Sepulchre*. Releasing debarkation crew now.'

He felt a pressure against his arm.

And again, harder.

He blinked.

'What,' he said.

'You did it again,' said Vina, pilot primus.

'Did what?'

'Stare.'

'What is there to stare at that I've not seen ten thousand times before?'

'You tell me.'

'Thee heavy, blast-reinforced plasteel of IR-7755's cockpit doors echoed the leaden tramp of the *Forest Sepulchre's* stevedores going about their business. The effect was almost hypnotic. Raylan felt his consciousness cut adrift.

'What are you doing?' said Vina.

He looked down to see that he had been pulling on the buckles securing him to the co-pilot's throne.

'You can't leave the ship,' she said.

He undid the clasp, stumbling on void legs to the blast door to to punch in the override locks.

'It's against protocol!'

The door irised open.

In Raylan's mind, a close, black nebula cloud passed from the face of a bright, loving star. He felt purposeful. He felt good. He took that feeling, and stumbled onto the *Forest Sepulchre*.

IV

Adjutant Marshal Solent Grymn of the Cerethgion Hobilars, an Army auxilia regiment tithed in perpetuity to the service of the Dark Angels, sat in the back of the Dracosan armoured transport, itself part of a convoy of armoured vehicles strapped onto the grav-beds of the service train running from the auxilia barracks on deck tertio to the mustering halls via

strongpoint 1025/lambda.

Large-scale redeployments of auxilia personnel such as this were not made without reason, but those reasons were seldom disseminated beyond the upper echelons of order and division command. Grymn stared at the mousy grey spall liner that coated the inside of the tank's passenger compartment, directly ahead of him. The glassine fibre's matrix was complex, multilayered, endlessly repeating. Grymn felt his eyes sinking deeper, deeper, deeper into the structure's pores, feeling as though it could captivate him for hours.

He blinked, maybe a few minutes later, as a series of shudders and a final hard bang shook through the metal body of the tank. He was surprised, but curiously unperturbed, to find that the Dracosan had been unloaded from the grav-train and was now parked in a busy-looking mustering hall, the hatch down, a clipboard-wielding administratum official on the ramp. The other nineteen men of his squad were staring glassily at whatever happened to lie directly in front of them. This did not unduly trouble Grymn either.

'Who died in here?' said the clerk.

The adjutant-marshal worked his dry mouth. He blinked again, lizard-slow, as the question he needed to ask formed in his mind, prepared for him the way a valet would lay out uniform correct for the occasion.

'Where are we going?'

If the clerk noticed the croak in Grymn's voice then he was loo harried to remark on it. 'Gerethgion Two Hundred and Fourteenth?' he asked.

'Yes.'

The clerk turned and pointed over the landmass-sized squadron of super-heavy landers that filled Grymn's view, the jetsam of men, tanks and mobile artillery platforms that tumbled about them. 'Then you're going to the Monarch Heavy Lander in bay nine.'

'I meant after that.'

The clerk shrugged.

Grymn shrank into his padded overcoat, as though he had been honoured with a critical objective only to have failed. He felt his own disappointment as a crushing weight when the clerk added a notation to his clipboard and walked back down the ramp. Once he was back on the deck plates, he signalled for the Dracosan's driver to close up. The hatch clanged shut and locked, and Grymn was alone in his own mind again. Feeling desolate,

Grymn turned his attention back to the fibres blanketing the walls. 'Stay,' he muttered, though to whom he could not say. 'We'll find out soon enough.' And something on the far side of space flickered, cold, but present, and Grymn smiled faintly as he felt his consciousness sink into the fibre puzzle once more.

V

No one challenged Enith Forsault as she entered the command deck from the subsidiary auxilia ramp and made her way down to the operations subdecks. Her authorisations were correct and her orders current. She was currently off-shift, but curiosity was discouraged amongst those in service to the Legion, and she was sufficiently well thought of her by her supervisors that none of them thought overmuch of her early arrival to duty.

The equipment pit at the top of the ingress ramp was a nest of monochromatic pict screens and floating tri-D hololiths of the Muspel System. A dozen or so uniformed petty officers moved about and, occasionally, through the flickering displays.

A recent recruit from the fleet scholam on Gravellax, she was a specialist in augury and auspectoriae. Prior to her transfer to the Fourth, and almost immediate retransfer to the 2003rd, Enith had imagined the formulation of the *Invincible Reason's* mortal crew to be a reflection of the Legion's: predominantly Calibanite but with a remnant core of veteran Terran officers in the senior ranks. What she'd singularly failed to appreciate was that Caliban, until about a hundred years ago, had been a pseudo-feudal death world. Most of its people couldn't jury-rig a recaff machine or interpret an augury to save their lives, and in any case, the Great Crusade had been going on for so long that the Invincible Reason hadn't had direct contact with Caliban in decades, and with Terra in approximately forever. Its crew came from everywhere. Only the liveries and a few adopted customs made them all look alike.

Floating within her own mind, she watched as what appeared to be a mind within her mind sifted through knowledge and memories and subconscious biases and interrogated them all.

A woman in the plain liveries and holo-visor cap of a midshipman walked towards her from her station at periscopy. Enith knew her. She dug out the

name.

Meredeth Halion.

'What brings you to the bridge?' Meredeth said.

'The Legion's preparing some kind of operation. Off-duty personnel have been recalled to their stations.'

'This is news to me.'

'You know how the Legion can be.'

Meredeth smiled, about to turn away when a look of concern creased her eyes. She leant forwards, squinting in the dappled canopy lighting favoured by the Dark Angels. 'When was your last medicae clearance? You're looking pale.' She reached out, running a thumb over Enith's cheek. 'Throne, I can almost feel the veins in your..'

The midshipman trailed off. Enith had the strange, wonderful, *joining* sensation of something unhooking from her own mind to seed itself in her friend's.

'What are the Legion up to?' she asked.

'I... don't know,' Meredeth mumbled, never once breaking eye contact. 'We don't ask. They never say.'

An alert light pinged from the woman's booth and she shook herself as though she had just nodded off at her post. Blinking her eyes, she turned towards it, fingers sheathed in haptic gauntlets swiping through an augury of floating pixels and hololithic light. Enith moved to stand by her shoulder, feeling as though something too large and too, too cold was wearing a coal made of her skin. She had been on a lot of ships and attended the very best of schools. Unlike the average Calibanite she could interpret an augury.

'What is it?' she asked, knowing full well, deep down, exactly what it was.

It was a Mechanicum ark. It was a flotilla of military transports and their escort frigates. It was an armada, moving inbound from the system Mandeville point at the speed of the slowest cargo junker in its auspex shadow. And in the centre of the cloud... in the centre... She squinted at the analyticae tri-D. The ship's profile was starkly non-imperial, several kilometres in length, and so slender that only a once-in-a-billion side-on fluke from an augur sounding could have picked up on anything at all. It was a reptile, hidden amongst a shoal of insignificant prey, lurking at the frigid outer limits of sensor range.

'It's nothing,' said Meredeth, quietly.

And she cancelled the alert.

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FOUR

I

Aravain watched though a pane of darkened, sound-proofed glass as Apothecary Sathariel went about his labours, scalpel-tipped appendages glinting under the subdued lighting, saws whirring, white armour shrouded in bone dust and blood splatter. Purgative oils burned with a blue flame from silver bowls, suffusing what was left of the breathable air with smoke, the entire tableau performed for the watching Librarians in busy, insectile silence.

'I am still in the dark as to why you summoned me from the *Vehemence* for this autopsy.' The Chief Librarian, Elikas, was clad in nightshade-blue armour shrouded with subtly off-white robes. They glittered with a purple metallic trim and embroidered sigils from the mystic night of old Caliban. The hood was drawn tight, the merest hint of an outline of a face within: a large, angular nose, the deep ridges of a frown. 'I can only assume that you suspect the touch of the witch, either upon this sorry individual himself or behind his actions aboard the *Obrin.'* He turned his shadowed hood back to the apothecarion screen. 'I perceive neither.'

'Trust that I have my reasons, lord,' said Aravain.

'Very well, but I have told you what I sense. You owe me at least as much in return. Your gift has always been in the divination of that which is hidden. That is why the Chaplains of the Firewing drew you into their brotherhood while most of the Librarius serves in the Dreadwing.' With a nod, barely perceptible, the Librarian gestured towards the cadaver on the apothecarion slab. 'Do you sense some hidden purpose in this corpse, brother? Something, perhaps, that has not yet come to be?'

'The opposite, my lord.'

Elikas turned to face Aravain, but no question was asked.

Aravain frowned, looking not at the Chief Librarian but at his reflection in the darkened pane. His allegiances within the Legion were manifold, a spider's web rather than a clear and unbroken chain.

'There was an element of premonition, yes,' he said, enunciating his words as carefully as a man would set his feet when walking on thin ice. 'But it was an echo of the past more than of a future yet unlived. It was after Carcasarn. The Lion had only recently divided the legion, scattered us to spread the Crusade and the victories of the First across his father's galaxy.'

'I remember,' said Elikas. 'I voyaged with Captain Telial of the Twenty-First Order to Tau-Asperidine, and was not recalled to the primarch's side until the second xenocide of the rangdan. I could have wept then. To be denied the companionship of my gene-Sire and father, having sought him over so many years of conquest.'

Aravain's gaze became distant. 'I was sent rimward with a battlegroup of the Ninth, towards the northern fringe of Segmentum Obscurus and the Ghoul Stars. My barge was with the flotilla that arrived to relieve the Nineteenth on Indra-Sul after the departure of the Raven Lord. What I saw there..'

He did not need to close his eyes to picture the memory clearly. Humans. Billions of them held like cattle, even after their liberation by the Raven Guard, an entire planetary population left functionally brain-dead by generations of intensive psychic harvesting by hungering xenos. To Aravain it was degradation of the worst imaginable kind, and the people of that world had lacked even the sentience to realise it. To the abhorrent xenos that had held the world captive for so long the humans had been little more than incubators for the psychic energies on which they fed. The iterators

who had deployed alongside the Dark Angels Ninth Order had, in horror, declared the survivors beyond redemption and recommended them to the Mechanician for servitude imperpetuis as lobotomised servitor slaves.

The Great Crusade had come too late to Indra-Sul.

As far as Aravain was concerned, a final act of mercy for its people was the very least the Dark Angels could offer in penance.

'What is it, brother?' Elikas prodded. 'What did you see?'

'Forgive me, master,' said Aravain. 'My experience aboard the *Obrin* must have disturbed my humours. I have already revealed more than I should.'

The Chief Librarian studied him from shadow. Elikas was a sufficiently powerful psyker to reach into his former pupil's mind and take whatever answers he sought, had curiosity compelled him to do so. He did not. However, instead turning his face back to the apothecarion glass.

'I learned the importance of secrets at the close of the Unification Wars,' he said, his mien distant. 'Even then we were our father's sons. As he was His.'

Aravain frowned, but before he could think whether it would be permissible to ask what the Terran meant, Sathariel gestured to them from beyond the darkened pane. Stepping back from the mutilated human corpse on the apothecarion slab, he pulled off his helmet. His hair was long, the colour of teak, his features angelically handsome, but with eyes as cold and sharp as the needles of winter pines. 'You've brought me a puzzle, Codicier,' he said, his voice transmitting tinnily through an augmitter system built into the antechamber's sound-proofed walls.'*After a lengthy warp-voyage in the wrong direction from the glories being won on Ullanor you've my gratitude for that.*'

'Explain,' said Aravain, leaning into the vox embedded in the sill beneath the glass.

'*Cause of mortis is straightforward enough. Mass-reactive trauma to the gut, followed by massive external haemorrhaging. But time of mortis is where things become strange. I would say it occurred thirty minutes after* Brother Peliath's *helm logs record the shot being fired.*'

'Tenacious,' said Elikas.

'*A feat of endurance that you or I might be capable of in extremis*,' said Sathariel. '*But for a mortal human? Death should have been instantaneous.*'

'Could the helm logs have been in error?' said Aravain.

'*Possible, albeit unlikely. But time of mortis is not the strangest thing.*'

'It's not?'

'*No.*'

'Speak, Apothecary.'

'*This man was dead days before Peliath shot him.*'

'What?' said Elikas.

'*At least he should have been.*' The Apothecary extended a bloodied claw towards the pinned-back wings of the mortal's cranium. '*He was suffering from extensive neural scarring. I have never seen anything quite like it. It is almost as if he experienced a dozen simultaneous aneurisms in almost every lobe of his brain. He would have needed intensive artificial support just to maintain his body's autonomous functions. As for running the decks until the arrival of Brother Peliath, well...*' A distorted whine travelled through the augmitter pads as the armoured Apothecary shrugged.

Elikas turned to Aravain. 'Does this mean something to you, brother?'

Aravain's face remained a mask.

'A puzzle, my lord,' he said, 'The Apothecary is right about that.'

'It is as though something was eating his mind,' Elikas murmured, turning back to the glass, 'and keeping him alive. The Lion was wise to impound the Muspellian vessels pending further inquiry. I will confer with the primarch about dispatching a force from the Librarius with interemptor escort to scour the *Obrin* more thoroughly.'

Aravain hesitated, unsure how to answer, before deciding that it was best, and safest, to let Elikas proceed with his investigations as he saw fit. It was almost certain that the Chief Librarian had access to lore and resources that he too could not share. At least not yet.

Instead, he simply bowed his head.

'I thank you for your assistance in this, master. If you will excuse me, I have other duties to perform.'

Elikas also gave a moment to hesitation, then dipped his head in return.

With a last glance at the ruined corpse beyond the glass, Aravain drew up his hood, becoming anonymous once more, before taking his leave.

Aravain knelt before the carved sarcophagus, his rigid poleyns crunching into the coarse-grained flagstones.

The sepulchre was a quiet place, a place of reflection, where a knight could pay respect to the fallen, or kneel in vigil under the gaze of those who had passed from duty before them. A knight who felt himself wanting

would often absent himself from his brothers to meditate instead amongst this labyrinth of the fallen, the confidences of the dead invariably serving to temper a warrior's melancholia with the sanguine. Others came in penance, chastened by their superiors for a lapse in conviction or valour and sent before their heroes to meditate on their failings. It was a sacred space. No one within the Legion ever spoke of it in such anachronistic terms, but that was what it was. It was consecrated ground. Hallowed. No sentinels stood guard, but the sheer imposition of darkly dressed stone, its virginal spaces and flickering braziers, was enough to convince most mortals to direct their curiosity elsewhere.

The sarcophagus to which Aravain gave his deference had been carved into the likeness of an armoured knight. The figure appeared to be a mortal warrior, lacking the gigantism, reinforced bone structure and heavier facial muscles of an altered legionary. The armour, too, was of an ancient pattern with which Aravain was unfamiliar. He held a chainsword across his chest, point down. The craftsmanship was exquisite. The Dark Angels as a Legion made little of their aesthetic sensibilities, but when driven to fashion objects of reverence their skill was bettered only by the warrior-artisans of the III or the IX, even if the Dark Angels' work tended more towards the morbid and the melancholic. The lapidary had even captured a look of irritation in the warrior's likeness, as though the entombed knight grew impatient with Aravain's obeisance. An austere plaque across the hilt of the knight's weapon bore a name in curling script. *Sar Castis*. It listed the date of his death as 869.M30.

The reason given was stated simply: *Service to the Emperor*.

Aravain had never known the warrior, nor why he had been honoured with a tomb in the sepulchre. He had fallen almost eighty years before Aravain's ascension to the Legion. His sarcophagus looked less frequently visited than others, diligently maintained by the sextons, of course, but lacking the occasional oath paper or folded-leaf charm that fluttered as tokens from the sarcophagi of jeremus or Melian or Hector Thrane.

This was where the message had bidden him to wait. And so this was where he waited.

'*It is right that the deeds of past heroes be honoured, however dim in the memory their battles have become.*'

The voice came from the hall behind him. Aravain had heard no one

approach. Not even a psychic inkling to forewarn him.

'For while men are temporal and destined to be forgotten, their deeds are manifestations of their courage, and that lives on in all who follow.'

'So long as one man remembers them,' said Aravain, completing the obscure quotation from the Meditations, as he turned to look over his shoulder.

The other legionary was robed in white, impossible to identify with his hood fully drawn and his surcoat draped across his war-plate's identifiers. Even his voice was nondescript. The only identifying feature was a silver talisman, worn above the robes, a cluster of mistletoe berries worked in polished glass. Aravain had a similar device etched into his armour, green vines clambering up his cuisse before flowering into an identical motif where the rotator rings of his hip flexors met the base of his plackart plate. It was meaningless artistry to anyone not charged with the deadly knowledge it represented.

'It is a brave man or an errant one to stand thus against the march of history,' he said.

'Such is the duty of a knight,' the other returned

Aravain drew the matching talisman from his robes.

'Cruciatum,' he said, his signifier within the order.

The other studied it.

'Come with me, brother,' he said.

II

Dark heroes dragged by as Aravain and his mysterious guide walked through the sepulchre, the tombs recessed behind granite columns and cloth portieres or stunningly memorialised in caryatid form. There was no other sound but the hiss-stamp of powered boots on stone flags Beneath a soaring clerestory of mezzotinted glass and barrier fields, Aravain paused to look up. The windows were dark, simple patterns of white and grey, but in their hardened crystal structure was caught the glitter of stars, the lights of ships, the flare of orbital debris impacting on shields. This was an old galaxy, a crowded galaxy, pockmarked by the battlefields of ancient prehistory and overflowing with the corpses of failed empires. To stand here, somewhere in the Sagittarius Arm of the Ultima Segmentum, and to look back, in about

this direction, towards the Orion Spur, was to dwell upon the star that had warmed the atmosphere of Old Earth a hundred thousand years before: a past far deeper and blacker than any prognostiseer would dare to probe.

Muspel was not nearly so old, but it had its own dark secrets.

Aravain could feel it.

His guide turned off the clerestory onto a flight of stairs partially hidden behind a tapestry. Only short, the flight rose a half spiral towards a small chancel, one of the many discreet spaces for those knights whose deeds and modesty precluded them from internment in the principle promenades of the sepulchre.

At the final turn, another anonymous hooded warrior barred Aravain's path. The legionary made half a sign in the air. Aravain completed it.

The knight dipped his head, which Aravain mirrored in turn. Both knights straightened simultaneously. The guard nodded, apparently satisfied, and stepped aside. Aravain entered.

He looked around, studying the private chancel in detail. A coal fire burned in an open brazier, chasing shadows across walls of dressed Calibanite stone, glinting off the ancient weaponry on display. A sarcophagus of coarse-grained gabbro lay across the occidental-oriental line with sidereal 'north' pointing towards the ship's distant bow. Its lid bore the repose of a hooded knight. The floor around it was traced with the golden lines of the Spiral Path. A Calibanite theosophy, it represented the progression from outer to inner, the deification of knowledge as something to be accumulated and earned through mastery of the path. It also commonly symbolised death, the completion of one path and the beginning of another.

In addition to the guardian at the door and the guide four knights stood at the points of the compass rose detailed around the sarcophagus Each was of a similar height and, gin in war-plate beneath their plain white robes, of similar build. None had come armed and all stood with crossed arms in identical fashion. The one point of disambiguation was a small thing, but as striking to the eyes of one attuned to subtlety as a rosary of coloured lights.

The knight at the septentrional point wore a golden talisman rather than one of silver, the berries of the device crafted from nacre instead of plain glass.

The preceptor of the Order of Santales.

Or so Aravain could only assume. Never in his own brief tenure within the order had a threat arisen requiring a gathering of the cenobium, the inner circle of their order's most august and learned knights. Nor did he have any inkling as to who the preceptor might be when he was not performing his duties to the orders sinister. He could be a common legionary or a praetorate of the Lion. When they met as luminaries of the order it made no difference.

The only other legionary that Aravain knew for certain was a member was Vadric, a veteran of the original First Legion and his former Chaplain from the Ninth Order, in whom Aravain had confided the horrors of Indra-Sul. It had been Vadric, in turn, who had inducted him into the Order of Santales. It could have been Vadric wearing the preceptor's chain, or not Aravain could not even say with certainty if the old warrior was a part of the inner circle at all.

Within the order there were no names. Outside of it. the order did not exist.

'Welcome, my brothers,' said the preceptor.

The voice was almost familiar, but altered in tone, accent and points of emphasis to make it difficult to recognise. He uncrossed his arms from his chest and the other three knights did likewise, like robotica under haptic control. He extended one hand in welcome across the black gabbro, his robes partially falling away from a rerebrace rich in emerald-green iconography. The other knights silently repositioned themselves, making space within their circle for Aravain and his guide from the Parade of Heroes.

The unspeaking guardian turned his back.

Aravain did not know him either. Perhaps a seventh knight of the cenobium drawn by lot to perform that thankless task. A probationary member of the inner circle, maybe, or a trusted acolyte of the preceptor.

Aravain had further on the spiral path to walk yet.

'Almost one hundred and sixty years ago this order was founded.' The preceptor spoke again once the knights had settled. 'Named for the santales, a plant native to the forests of Caliban. It is a hale and aggressive species, feeding not off the soil but from the trunks of the mighty trees upon which it grows. It is a parasite. And though it keeps its host strong and immune to the seasons, sheathing it in sharp thorns and poisonous berries that deter all

but the most reckless herbivore or woodsman, it does so only to feed its need. And when the great oak can sustain that need no longer then the santales will withdraw its roots to seek another, leaving naught but a husk of withered bark behind it.'

The assembled knights nodded.

'It is not enough to cut away the vines. The roots of the santales plant go deep, and the patient woodsman must follow its course across dozens, even hundreds of dead and dying boles before he might arrive at its stem.' The preceptor paused. 'By the oaths you have sworn to me and to this order I have drawn you from your duties to the Legion. You all know why. All of the fallen worlds that we have encountered across this dark fringe of the Umperor's galaxy, the lore that we have gathered and kept safe even from our own - it is for this day, my brothers, the dawn we all feared to meet but swore to face together should it come/

The santales,' growled one.

'Speak their name, brother. Let there be no more allusions here/

'*The khrave*.' The six knights spoke as one, the alien word trembling from their hoods with the common voice of loathing.

The preceptor turned towards Aravain.

'Through our brothers in the hierarchy of the Firewing, one of our circle was a party to the boarding action on the *Obrin.'* The other knights turned to regard Aravain. 'Apprise the cenobium of your encounter there, brother.'

Taking a moment to order his thoughts, Aravain gave his account.

He began with a simple recital of the after-action reports that the Interrogator-Chaplains of the Firewing had compiled on the attempted mutinies aboard the Muspellian ships. They had discerned no warnings missed by the planetary authorities, no obvious connection or suspicious level of association between the erstwhile recidivists to indicate pre-emption. And yet their actions had been timed to the nanosecond and coordinated for the infliction of maximum disruption. If the Lion had not brought the Legion to Muspel when he had then Aravain was in no doubt that the Muspellian fleet, and perhaps even the planet itself, would now be in the grip of the khrave.

What their immediate goals had been, Aravain did not know and admitted as much when his account demanded it. To suborn control of the Muspellian fleet? Or simply to destroy it? He could only speculate.

He spoke then of his own experience, the unease he had fell the moment he had disembarked from his gunship. The sense of being observed, perceptions of a wholly alien intent being slowly unfurled from across the blackness of the void.

Where possible, he took pains to cull his account of any names or signifiers by which he might be personally identified. The perceptive would be able to glean even from his sanitised rendition that he was a member of the Librarius, and any knight of centurion rank or above would have been able to access the mission archives and draw his name and that of Squad Martlet from the *Obrin* files.

An honourable knight, however, would not seek to do so, and the least he could do to uphold his own oaths of secrecy was to deny them that temptation.

The preceptor bowed as Aravain concluded his testimony.

'It was I who received your missive from the *Obrin.'*

'I am honoured,' said Aravain.

'I heard reports of similar occurrences from Squad Raptora aboard the *Mirikov*,' said one of the five.

'And I from the *Vassily*.' Another. 'She has been impounded by the *Wrath of Caliban* and nothing more has been heard of her since. Some say it is at the Lion's own command.'

'If that is so then it will be obeyed,' said the preceptor.

'I arranged for the remains of one of the mutineers, slain by Brother Peliath, to be returned under medicae stasis to the *Invincible Reason* for dissection. According to Apothecary Sathariel he had been dead for many days. Through no failing of his own, the Apothecary lacks the knowledge to recognise the symptoms, but the human's mind has been psychically devoured, his body sustained only by some massive external force.'

'*Santales*,' one of the cenobium murmured, making the sign across his breast.

'Proof then,' said another.

'If proof were needed.'

'We are fortunate you were on that mission, brother-' began a fourth, the guide.

'He was there for a reason,' the preceptor interrupted. 'As the Lion brings us all to Muspel for a reason.' He turned his head to address the full circle of

knights. The question then is this - is Muspel itself infested with the santales parasite or have we stymied its encroachment here by denying it the planet's ships?' The hooded knight sighed. 'You have all read the same reports as I have been granted. You know the misrule under which this system seems to have laboured since the departure of the Ninth, the inexplicable sense of lethargy that characterises its native people. Knowing all of this I cannot allow myself to hope that the planet is clear of parasitism. And yet, for all the lore we have safeguarded in our conquest of the northern fringe, we must be wary, lest unfounded assumptions lead us and our brothers into folly. Those blighted worlds we encountered before were lifeless husks already, centuries withered. The nearest we have come to encountering a living khrave world was Indra-Sul, and of that the Raven Lord left precious little for our order to examine.'

'Then what are we to do?' said one.

'Watch, brother, as always. Ensure that the influence of the khrave finds no foothold within our own.'

'They will not,' said another.

'Do not be so certain,' said Aravain, and though it guilted him to censure another on the charge of arrogance, he felt it justified. Me reflected on the psychic imprint he had felt in the corridor aboard the Obrin and shuddered at the cold, inhuman potency of the residue it had left behind. The immensity of it. The khrave are psychic xenoforms of tremendous power. The fleet has been taking periodic auguries of the system since our arrival and discovered no sign of alien vessels or bases. Whatever they do, they do from far beyond the limits of this solar system. Think on that, brothers. Imagine the power of it, if you can, and overestimate your ability to resist their influence at your peril.'

The cenobium exchanged hooded glances.

'The Lion must be warned.'

'Agreed,' the six knights spoke as one.

'The Lion is a master of the war unseen,' said Aravain, 'but how can even he be on his guard against the xenos that strikes with a loyal hand, from beyond the reach of the Invincible Reason's lances?'

'The Lion sees and hears all,' said the preceptor. 'For now, return to your squads and your duties within the Legion, and take your knowledge with you.'

'Is it not time to lift the veil from this threat?' said Aravain.

'Secrecy is our shield,' said the preceptor. 'It is how we defend lesser men from themselves.'

'We should activate Dreadwing protocols, and open the Santales armourium.'

The preceptor raised a hand to silence the ripple of assenting mutters.

'I will confer with the high preceptor.'

'Will you tell him that the khrave come to Muspel?' said Aravain.

'No, brother. I will tell him that the khrave have been here waiting for us from the beginning.'

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FIVE

I

At the same time that the warships of the First Legion were corralling, sectioning and individually quarantining the Muspellian garrison fleet a squadron of jet-black Stormbirds screamed into the upper atmosphere. They shuddered across the ionopause, aerofoils straining, smoke streaming from wing flaps and vents. Names licked over the heat shielding orange to yellow to armaplas-melting white. Pinks and greens limned the armament hard points and the noses as the planet turned a flamethrower to every hidden contaminant trace in the armour. In spite of the atmospheric turbulence, so different to the mathematised precision of void flight, they held formation, metres apart. Their descent plots were perfect. The adaptive reflexes of their pilots were transhuman. With a series of bumps, the squadron broached the tropopause, scraps of white cloud ripping across their fuselage and burning up. Second by second the cloud layer thickened until, with no warning at all, it was torn away.

Slipping into a new formation, a long 'sword' with crossed quillons formed by a pair of Stormbirds apiece, the Dark Angels aircraft rocketed across a

sprawl of post-urbanised neglect.

There were dozens of smaller settlements scattered across Muspel's primary landmass, mostly classified by the IX Legion's civilian census-takers as agri-complexes. Homesteads by any other definition, kinship groups of hunter-gatherers and subsistence-level farmers. Their populations ranged from single digits to the low hundreds. There was one city of note. It went by the official Imperial moniker 'Muspellia Primus' although doggedly held onto its native appellation of 'Maripose'. Its layout was typically pre-Old Night, the buildings bespoke, the conurbations sprawling, lacking the enforced standardisation and brutalist symmetry of an Imperial colonisation. Irregular buildings constructed from a black crystalline rock native to no quarry on this world lay unlit and unloved where they had been abandoned, dead for centuries if not for millennia. They dotted the earth between the mountainous uplands of the Namastor, the storm-lashed grey peaks that lay about fifty kilometres to the north, and the artificial reefs of the ancient harbour. Industrial-scale trawlers and construction vessels operating out of the newly refurbished Imperial docks crawled over the grey-water. Altitude made the waves appear frozen.

Wingtip to wingtip, the Stormbirds deployed brake flaps. The huge aircraft juddered with the sudden resistance as the formation veered into the Sheitansvar's heavily restricted airspace.

The Sheitansvar was the colloquial name for the archipelago of islands that projected out from the headland like a horn or a tail. There were five of them - Coccyges, Lament, Merigion, Nigris and Uncus - becoming increasingly desolate and armoured in rock the further into the ocean they sat. Crusade logs reported that Muspel was a planet without even the most basic and primitive of weaponry, but the Sheitansvar as a whole, and cliff-sided Uncus in particular, exuded the feel of a site that had always been a fortress, a place where hostile armies would come to die. Another mystery in the enigma of Muspel.

The stippled, Dark Age ruins of the islands' fortifications had been extended with the harsh features of gothic architecture. Prefabricated bridges of Imperial design linked the islands of the peninsula chain. They were built off the pilings of older versions that appeared to have collapsed centuries ago. As one travelled further across those bridges, the terrain itself becoming less hospitable and more overtly hostile, the defensive curtains

grew steadily higher. The armoured blisters of flak batteries and void banks, additions wisely left in place by the engineers of the IX, became ever denser, until one arrived at the Vaniskray. The highest and farthest-flung promontory of the entire Sheitansvar, the wave-beaten keep of Muspel's planetary ruler was enviably defensible. The castle's foundations went deep into the rock of the promontory, barred oriels and gun loops studding the cliff face all the way down to where waves exploded into spray over lumpen rock armour. Every centimetre of ground was battlemented, a mess of gun nests and turrets, swallowtails duelling in the incessant wind with the occasional flourish of Baalite statuary. With the exception of the guns themselves, most of the defensive work long predated the craftsmanship of the Blood Angels.

With limited space for landing facilities on the tiny, densely fortified islet, the Stormbirds descended towards the second isle in the archipelago chain.

Designated 'Lament' by the Imperial logisters, only a handful of structures stood there and, unusually for Maripose, all of them were purely Imperial in design and function: aircraft hangars and promethium silos, a few dozen Hydra defence batteries mounted on rotatable platforms either side of a five hundred-metre-long runway. It was home to two dozen squadrons of defence flyers, the most illustrious engine in its host a Xiphon-pattern interceptor with ace decals and the campaign badges of the Cryllic Wars on her fuselage - until seventeen of the most glorious military machines ever to emerge off the forges of mankind touched down on Muspel.

Lion El'Jonson was a being of few words. When he made a statement, it was heard.

II

The Lion paused at the foot of Nighthawk's descent ramp, arms crossed over his breastplate, cloak whipping about in the turbofan downwash, and gazed wordlessly into the drizzle.

Lament was a grey island. The most uncompromising of the Sheitansvar chain, it was the lowest and nearest to sea level. Night-black waves beat against the rugged rock armour and wooden pilings that defended the esplanade from the sea, periodic explosions of icy spray sweeping in as far as the Stormbirds on the runway. The geosculptors of the Mechanicum who

had arrived with the Imperial colonisation had accelerated that aeons-long process of natural weathering to grind the entire island down to a perfect level plane. They had serially layered its rugged bedrock with rockcrete, ferrocrete and ceramite until it more closely resembled an attack carrier rising from the water to launch a squadron of Starhawk-pattern bombers than an island, wholly artificial in form and in purpose. It took senses keener and less easily fooled than sight to pierce the illusion.

The place was eerily quiet. The Lion picked up on the squelch of boot leather on wet ground, the scrape of rubberised hoses as the island's ground crew hurried to attend him, audible not because they were unusually loud but because everything bar the breaking action of the waves themselves was so uncommonly quiet. The air smelled of salt corrosion and seaweed.

To the Lion the sounds of a city told him as much as the rustle of leaves above a forest track, the shift of ground litter under an incautious tread.

He was tasting the wind.

Listening.

Waiting.

The first virtue of a master hunter was patience. The first learned by the hunted was caution. The Lion had been both in his time.

He knew how to be prey when it was necessary.

Across the parallel runways, a Company-strength force, a hundred knights of the Legion, had already disembarked to take up fire positions around the Stormbirds' armoured and void-shielded hard points. *Nighthawk* herself was a sovereign amongst angels. Her sleek obsidian planes were adorned with the six wings of the hexagrammaton and the hundred secret paths of the hekatonys-tika. Gilt scrollwork and golden edging embellished her armour plates and missile pods while, pride of place across her nose section, there was emblazoned a gold-wreathed aquila, an emblem usually reserved for the palatines of the III Legion. It marked this as the very vessel that had once conveyed the Master of Mankind, beloved by all, to Caliban. She had been presented in tribute to the newly denominated Dark Angels, a gift as worthy as the Leonine Panoply or the *Lion Sword*.

Ground crew in fluorescent orange tabards hastened under the Legion's guns, dragging their promethium hoses towards the majestic war machines. On the runway beyond them, a thin line of mortal officials stood, a nervous flock of grey-haired military men and women in ceremonial breastplates,

padded shoulders and variously coloured braid, surrounded by an anxious rabble of robed ancillaries.

'The people of this world are given to melancholia,' the Lion observed.

'As the Angel noted in his reports, Sire,' said Duriel, walking out onto the ramp behind him.

'If the sight of my brother cannot stir these people's hearts then perhaps it is too much for me to expect more.'

The Lion stepped off the ramp and out from under the Stormbird's projecting fuselage. The rain began pattering on his war-harness. His cloak became heavy. Sodden hair traced threads of gold across the elaborate black ceramite of his pauldrons. Only once the Lord of the First had cleared the ramp did Duriel then follow in his footsteps. After him came Holguin, master of the Deathwing, and his voted successor. Veteran-Sergeant Herodael. The two champions were encased in Tartaros-pattem Tactical Dreadnought plate and marched from Nighthawk at the head of a retinue of Companion knights girt in bone-white armour. The colour was an honorific representative of the death blow that each warrior had taken on behalf of their liege and survived. The grey-headed sergeant held the primary's Lion Helm under the crook of one immensely armoured and servo-jointed arm. In the other he proudly bore the banner-of-arms of the First Legion, a black tapestry adorned with Terranic heraldry older than the inception of the l^egiones Astartes themselves.

To the militant tattoo of waves and rain and the cool-down cycle of the Stormbirds' landing jets, the Companion Terminators formed up behind their lords and the Lion strode towards the waiting dignitaries.

'There has been fighting here recently,' said Holguin.

'I see it,' said the Lion.

The brutal smoothness of the runway was pockmarked, as if it had been raked with heavy auto-fire. Scorch marks and vehicle skids, although partially hidden by rain and foam, marred the surface. Riddling holes originating from something around the calibre of a light autogun perforated the alum flex hangar sheds. The lack of hard physical evidence - bodies, shell casings, actual combatants - spoke of an impressive attempt at concealing the fact that any such altercation had taken place at all.

'Orbital auguries tell a similar story to that which the Firewing has been putting together from the garrison fleet, Sire,' said Duriel. 'A series of

apparently uncoordinated and yet simultaneous uprisings taking place at critical locations all over the city, including this one. But why would they hide that there has been a battle here?'

'Or try to,' said Holguin.

'Fear,' said the Lion. 'Or shame.'

'I do not understand,' said Duriel.

The Lion smiled, faintly. 'I did not imagine that you would.'

The Muspellian officials on the runway saluted as the delegation of Angels and their Terminator-encased escort approached. With his officers and staff standing stiffly attentive, the planetary governor stepped forward. He was of average height, with short greying hair, neatly trimmed beard and slender pencil moustache. He wore a bronzed cuirass etched with heraldic beasts of Terran mythology, and crossed by a crimson sash. A similarly coloured horsehair plume billowed from the cavalrymen's helm he held under one trembling arm. An antique sabre lay in an ornate sheath against his hip, power crystals woven through its gilt basket-hilt. It had probably not been drawn since his distant ancestors had fought at Gaduare. A holstered volkite serpenta rested beside it.

The Lion had long held that the calibre of man was in reverse proportion to their need to make their worth known. It was a belief that had yet to be proven false.

The governor pressed his palm to his breast and bowed low.

'I am Baron Selus Hohngerron Marsepian, Lord-General in perpetuity of the Forty-Seventh Lotharingian Grenadiers, and Governor-Marshal of Muspel. On behalf of this loyal world I offer my humble service and unending fealty to the firstborn son of the Emperor.'

'Beloved by all,' declared the men and women behind him.

Herodael struck the standard of the First into the rockcrete. The governor could not have misinterpreted the symbolism.

'The sincerity of your welcome is noted,' said the Lion, 'undone only by your blatant obfuscation elsewhere.'

'My...?'

Greater rhetoricians than Marsepian had sought to cross words with the Lion and learned to rue it. High Lords and primarchs alike swallowed their grievances before bringing them before the Lord of the First. Even Magnus the Red, seldom one to concede from defeat in a case he saw as just had

chosen not to argue against the annihilation of a pacifist xenos empire and their treasures when confronted by the implacable will of the Lion.

It was, by said many, like speaking with the Emperor Himself.

The governor-marshal's will came undone before the first word-sound of his argument had formed. The Lion pinned him beneath the weight of his regard a moment longer before releasing him. The general visibly sagged.

'There is much work to be done here, Governor-Marshal, and I assure you my sons will know no rest until it is accomplished.'

'Work to...?'

The Lion silenced him with presence alone, then turned his face into the sleeting rain. 'There is a predator here. I know it. It is an instinct. The forest is disturbed. I can feel its attentions upon me now.' He turned back to the cowering governor. 'I am not interested in your explanations, nor in your excuses, for it is my belief that I will find no answers in them.' The aged Governor-Marshal began to weep before the cold, eloquent, measured anger of the Lion. Once more he sought to speak up in his own defence, but faced with the Primarch, his sobs were all he could muster. The other gathered dignitaries shrank into their formal attire, mouths closed, eyes averted. 'I will find my own answers. You may consider yourself relieved of your title until I do. Brother Duriel.'

'Yes, Sire.'

'I appoint you warden of Muspel and castellan of the Vaniskray.'

Duriel dipped his head. "Yes, Sire.'

'Make whatever modifications you deem necessary to improve the castle's defensibility. You have complete freedom to requisition any additional weapons systems or construction materials from the fleet stores.' The Lion turned to the remaining humans. 'My sons do not enjoy the renown of the Fourth or the Seventh for their skill with plascrete and stone, nor do they seek it, for the deed alone is enough, but you will find them their equal in all regards.'

'Thank you, Sire.' Duriel glanced at the prostrate form of the previous governor, then at the Lion. He lowered his voice. 'Against what am I defending it?'

The Lion's smile was a fleeting thing, far above the ability of any there present to see it for what it was or decipher its true meaning.

His hard green eyes turned to the far rock of the Vaniskray.

'Whatever it is that disturbs the forest.'

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SIX

I

Duriel's axe sang as he worked it through the spiral forms, humming through the cold air of the citadel like the wings of a hunting bird.

Whum.

Gioliath slabs of gene-forged muscle slid across his shoulders as he managed the double-bladed weapon's weight. His feet shifted, following the path of the weight, moving instinctually on a helical path.

Whum.

Perspiration gleamed from the bare muscles of his chest and back, in spite of the salt bite of the air. Freezing rain came into his cell through the narrow balistraria in flurries. Colonies of seabirds squalled. Hundreds of metres below the ramparts and revetments and the artillery casemates he had ordered stapled to the walls, waves crashed over artificial rocks. His muscles throbbed with a dull ache, his secondary heart delivering sporadic kicks to his rib plate. His breathing was hoarse and shallow, but like everything to do with his physiology his body's homeostatic systems were perfect, and no breath clouded the chill air.

It had been weeks.

Whum.

From the Legion level down through that of orders, cohorts and companies, and ultimately the individual knight, the Dark Angels eschewed specialisation, at least overtly, preferring to be the master in every potential arena of war. Nevertheless, he had built his reputation as a siegemaster and a castellan on Sarosh, and then on Carcasarn, conceiving and then commanding the assault that would break the xenos siege lines and relieve the embattled Ultra-marines. He had broken the bastions of uncompliant worlds, of orks and rangda and men, and raised twice as many in the austere mould of Caliban, and the hierarchy of the Ironwing had honoured his achievements accordingly.

The Vaniskray served as a commendable foundation, but Duriel had yet to meet the redoubt that he could not better.

Whum.

Carved from the bleak rocks of Uncus, the outermost dot of the Sheitansvar archipelago chain, the Strife-era fortress was formidable. Troops could be landed only by sea or by air, or marched across the kilometre-long bridge to Nigris, the next isle in the fortress chain. From there, a narrow esplanade ran perpendicular to the escarpment of the Vaniskray, a straight shot towards the fuel dumps and pillboxes on the fort's leeward littoral, and all within range of the entire keep's punishing array of guns.

The siegemasters of the IV and VII Legions approached their craft in terms of higher walls and heavier guns, superior logistics and crude calculations of risk versus reward. For their counterparts within the knighthood of Caliban it was the maze that dominated. The martial expression of the Spiral Path, it formed the basis of that world's fortress-building traditions.

To the Vaniskray's already labyrinthine architecture of tunnels and fortalices, Duriel had brought the byzantine rigour of a master of the Calibanite school. He had installed mirrors and holofields, long blind tunnels, installed portcullises that led nowhere, and had devoted weeks of hard labour to engineering a randomised system of openings and closures of the communications and supply lanes that would alter the layout on a half-hourly basis.

Individual garrison commanders would have as much knowledge as was needed to hold their section of the Vaniskray's defensive circles, but no more. Only Duriel, its castellan, and the Lion himself held the secret codes and encryption algorithms that would allow them to navigate it fully.

There was a method behind such sparsity of information: if the legion's own officers could not navigate the fortress beyond their own redoubts then an intruder could not help but be confounded, and no single act of carelessness or treachery could ever see the entire bastion fall.

As a code of war, it was harsh, demanding as its basis the thesis that humankind was fallible and, ultimately, could not be trusted with the tools of its own defence.

Such was the philosophy of the Lion.

Whum.

Close to four thousand knights were garrisoned at the Vaniskray. The same number again had been spread out across the other four islets of the Sheitansvar and the handful of critical structures in the city of Maripose. About a hundred knights of the Ravenwing on Skyhunter jetbikes patrolled the Chattelrad, the transcontinental road that cut east from Maripose to the tiny settlements on the far coast. A handful of Scout squads watched over the isolated farmsteads up in the Namastor Peaks.

Whum.

He had engineered choke points, murder holes and enfilades. He had mined the bridges, cleared firing lines, and installed Tarantula sentinel batteries in every corridor. He had doubled the guards, reordered the watches, assigned knights of the 12th order to critical junctions. He had even gone so far as to reinforce the cabling from the void banks, adding backups, doubling the capacity.

Whum.

He would man the wall. He would hold the line. The First Legion did not crave the glory that so many of their cousins sought. Victory was not some antlered buck to be mounted on the walls of their keeps, to impress upon all the martial valour of the First. It was enough to fight in the Emperor's wars and to know that they had done their duty.

And yet each new day saw that commitment to diligence challenged. Each new day saw the Legion's astropaths awakened from their chemically induced torpor with screams of exultation.

In a void battle that had raged for seven days and cost a thousand ships, Guilliman had broken the ork armadas of the Nalkari subsector, opening the door for an assault on Ullanor itself. The Khan ran riot over a dozen worlds. Constantine Valdor had slain Goff Dakka, the dread lieutenant of Warboss Urg, in single combat while the fortress scrap-world of Calgarix burned around them. Across the Ullanor Sector, fortresses were toppled, fleets put to the torch, tyrants cast down, glory cut from the heart of the mightiest of humanity's foes, and every victory brought the Emperor and Horus nearer to the throneworld of the last great xenos empire.

After Rangda, he could not keep himself from adding.

Throughout every astropathic vision of jubilation, he had not wavered in his commitment to this duty. The Lion had bidden him to make of this keep a fortress worthy of the First, and make this a fortress he would. He would not question why.

But still.

It had been weeks.

He thumbed the activation stud on the reverse of the axe's grip, sheathing the two blades in auric light. Rain hissed off the energised weapon.

Whum-whum-whum-whum.

Pivoting on the balls of his bare feet he turned with a roar, axe sweeping up overhead, and then down. The axe crashed, spitting and sparking, against the unyielding barrier of a countervailing disruption field. This one haloed a length of dark steel, bocaged and filigreed, a Terranic warblade that was to humbler weaponcraft as the Emperor was to mankind. Duriel's eyes widened as lightning sparked from the grating power fields, biceps bulging as he fought to pull back against the momentum of his blow. The disruption fields wavered like two candles, flickering under the rain that slanted into the cell.

The wind blustered through the plain white surplice that the primarch wore over his armour, spotting the loosely bound gold of his hair with coppers and bronzes.

'Damn it, Sire,' Duriel gasped.

He deactivated the axe, the energy sheath vanishing.

The Lion lowered his warblade in turn, wearing one of his apoclyphal smiles. 'Your form is flawless, my son. But you could do with better mastering your humours.'

Duriel raised an eyebrow, still breathing heavily from the shock of his primarch's appearance, and then bowed his head.

'I will strive to do so, Sire.'

The Lion nodded in return, but said nothing.

Some primarchs were able mask their inhumanity behind fraternal smiles and the shared bonds of a common culture, but the ability to put a lesser being at ease was perhaps the one skill the Lion had never truly mastered. He did not inspire with his oratory in the manner of Horus or Guilliman or Fulgrim.

He preferred to lead by deed and by example, and in battle's aftermath to honour a few favoured knights with his laurels and company rather than permit the sycophancy that so many of his brothers indulged. A solitary childhood in the forests of Caliban had taught him to value his own thoughts to the exclusion of others, and to trust to his own strengths in all things.

Walking to the unmade slab that served as a bed, Duriel picked up oil and cloth and began to polish the axe-blades.

'Most of the First Legion favours the sword,' said the Lion, his warblade's power field flickering against the gloss ceramite of his greaves. 'Terran and Calibanite both. One of many things that our two worlds held in common.' Deactivating the weapon's power source, he lay the blade of the mighty sword in his left hand, lifting it to the level of his chest across open palms. 'In the fiefdoms of Old Earth the sword was seen as a nobler weapon. Any man could fashion a spear, or a woodsman's axe, but a sword? It took an artisan of rare skill to make a sword, and it was a difficult weapon to master. It required a devotion of time that most common fighters could ill afford to spare. And as it was on Terra, so it was on Caliban.' The Lion drew the blade across his palm and turned it upright, again wielding it one-handed. 'It even looks distinctly human, does it not? Its shape. Its intent. You can see why men through the ages have celebrated them. Why we give them names and imbue them with mystical powers.'

'Axes can have names, Sire. Your brother Ferrus named his hammer.'

The Lion smiled. Had Duriel not known his lord well, he might have missed it. 'Ferrus will always choose to be the exception, my son.'

Setting the axe down on the bed slab, Duriel drew a towel from the shelf above it and slung it over one shoulder. Feeling his skin beginning to

dimple now that he had ceased his exercises, he moved to close the shutters over the balistraria. Without appearing to move, the Lion was at his side. Had Duriel been mortal, with a mortal's ability to experience fear, he would have jumped from his skin. The father overrode the transhuman strength of the son without apparent effort, holding the shutter back to look out over the roiling black canvas of an ocean at night. The noise of it was greater from the sill than it had been from within the chamber, as was the smell. It was nothing akin to the muggy warmth of decomposing plant matter and toxic pollen to which Duriel was accustomed, but there was an unspoiled vitality to it that nevertheless reminded him of his forest home. A smattering of pinprick lights traced a series of bridges of the Sheitansvar back to the mainland and the veiled, washed-out glow of Maripose beyond. Somewhere amongst the turrets, hidden within the dark and the rain, a gull set up a harsh, croaking wail.

'A mother,' the Lion mused, looking out over Duriel's shoulder. 'Listen to her, my son. Hear how she attempts to draw our attention from her nest.'

The Lion had always had an intuitive way with animals, an understanding of their thoughts and frailties that he did not always demonstrate towards men. As always, however, Duriel found himself wondering if there was more to his utterance than was immediately obvious.

'Her nest is just here below the ledge, Sire. I should have cleared it to make way for the upgrades, but.. ' He took a deep breath and looked out, uncertain whether his lord could understand.

Even after a century and a half away from his birthworld Duriel still habitually walked the halls of his keep in full armour, and would often react to any unexpected sound as if it were a stalking predator. He did not think he would ever adapt to an environment where it was possible to walk unarmed or unclothed in perfect safety, a place where not every tiny life form was hell-bent on his misery. And yet here he was. The freedom to leave one blameless creature to go unharmed about its life was his one true source of pleasure. It made the burdens the Emperor laid upon the first of His angels seem less onerous.

'What service can I be to you, Sire?' he said, after standing in silence long enough for the gull below to cease her screeching. Nestling coos rose from her hidden nest beneath their position.

'You have already done well enough,' said the Lion, softly. 'Dorn himself

could have done no better.'

Duriel straightened. The Lion did not give out praise often or idly. Where it was given, it was duly merited.

'Thank you, Sire.'

A dull thump reverberated from the courtyard far below, the sudden blast of a war-horn sending the anxious seabird flapping from its perch and squawking out into the rain. The Lion peered down, and for a while lord and knight listened to the distant hammering of rain on Titan armour.

'A scout maniple from the Legio Osedax. You have taken my authorisation of complete freedom to heart.'

'I would have requisitioned more, but there is little room for them on these islands.'

'You have done well, Duriel.'

'I have downgraded the Muspellian militia regiments to ancillary support roles as you requested. I have rotated our own auxilia detachments from the 2003rd, and deployed Legion units throughout the fortress.'

The Lion withdrew to contemplative silence and Duriel joined him, watching the rain, listening to the deep, gurgling growl of a black ocean with only the vague unease that comes naturally to those compelled to stand for any length of time in the presence of a primarch.

'May I ask a question of you, Sire?' Duriel said, as the silence between them threatened to become an abyss.

'Ask.'

'Why are we here?'

'To hold this world.'

'Against whom?'

'A foe who would have destroyed it without so much as a recourse to battle were we not here. I can tell you no more than that. But this a world of the Imperium, my son. It must stand against whoever would assail it, and be defended accordingly.'

Duriel frowned in thought. 'The name ''Muspel' means Harvest , Sire. Did you know that?'

'I did.'

'This sector of the Ultima Segmentum is riddled with the remnants of failed human civilisations. What is left of their written records demonstrates a common root language shared across at least nineteen systems, including

this one.' The Lion said nothing, and Duriel took his silence as a lack of admonition. Duriel shrugged. 'The Great Crusade found nothing but graveyard cities and ancient writings. In the years before the final xenocide I worked with the Remembrancer order and like-minded brothers in the 15th to study them, but it is difficult to say what became of those civilisations. They seem to have just perished.'

'Did you see how the Mechanicum had levelled Lament to craft a useable airstrip?' the Lion said, changing the subject. Or appearing to. With the Lion it was difficult to be sure.

'Yes, Sire.'

'Have you wondered why a pre-imperial human planet did not have one already?'

Duriel paused while he considered.

The Lion smiled as though, by abstaining from answering, he had showed unexpected insight. The distant lumens of the Sheitansvar glinted from the whites of his teeth.

'Continue with your preparations, my son.'

He turned to walk away.

'How long do we mean to garrison this world for, Sire?'

The Lion turned to look over his shoulder. 'As long as is necessary.'

'There are other battles to be won.'

'Greater battles?'

Duriel hesitated for a moment, but then nodded.

'As my father once saw need to remind me, all battles are equal, except in how we choose to portray them. Look out there.' The Lion turned back to the leaden vista. 'Tell me what you see.'

Duriel looked.

'I see the castles on the Nigris bridge. I see the headlamps of our armour squadrons as they navigate the roads of Nigris and Merigion. I see the gunships and shuttles ferrying more troops and equipment from the fleet to Lament.'

'Shall I tell you what I see?' said the Lion.

'Yes, Sire. Please.'

'I see frustration. I see a predator that has been lying too long in wait for its kill. It is wary of us. It waits for us to move on but we do not. It grows hungry, and impatient for its feast. Once it becomes clear that we intend to

stay in force then it will have to strike.'

'Sire?'

'Accelerate the demobilisation of the Muspellian units. Deploy another two companies from the Legion to replace them, and as much auxilia support as they require. Spread the burden beyond the 12th. Give me your hand, my son.' Duriel opened his hand and the Lion placed upon it a graven disc bearing a stylised rendition of a Calibanite lion. It was the Grand Master's seal. Whoever possessed it could command total fealty from the Six Wings of the hexagrammaton, and of the Dark Angels. The Lion muttered a complex phrase under his breath, too low even for Duriel's altered hearing to pick up, and a ring of electronic lights in the disc's rim pipped. 'I authorise the activation of Dreadwing protocols.'

Duriel's mouth ran dry. 'Sire... the Dreadwing?'

'See that it is done.'

Duriel's hand closed over the Grand Master's seal. 'Yes, Sire.'

'Let our foe-in-hiding see our resolve to hold this place. Let it know that its option is to strike at us now or to surrender this world to me unfought. Let it know too that regardless of what it decides to do, I am going to command the Dreadwing to burn it out.'

* * *

II

The Vaniskray was next to deserted at this hour of the night.

Lights buzzed from tubular brackets, under incessant attack by moths and by rain. The deluge pattered on the battlemented plas-crete, rapping like knucklebones on the thick defensive walls, and ran down the pitted curves of weapon casemates to converge in a string of cataracts that drenched the moats and esplanades below. From the near-four thousand legionaries who garrisoned the gates and parapets of the Vaniskray there was no sound. No servant of the Imperium would ever say that a Dark Angel could walk in the shadow of a Night Lord unnoticed, or lay an ambush with more patience than any legionary of the XX, but the reason for that was not that it was not so. The Legio Osedax patrols of the tiny fortress isle provided a rhythmic thud, like the slow grind of thunder -and under such a downpour almost

possible to dismiss as such.

The Lion liked the darkness.

The cold stone walls reminded him of Aldurukh and the home he had forsaken in favour of duty. The dankness was the same, the elemental sense of oppression the same. Even the electric flutter of the lumen lubes was similar to that of a naked brazier, albeit with only the illusion of warmth and without the accompanying scent of ash.

Those few mortals with business to conduct at this hour did so in thick fur hats and wax coats, but the Lion strode their halls bare-headed, clad in thick armour and the plain white surplice of a knight.

To his own perception, he walked. To any human who might have been watching, he prowled: an angel come to earth to stalk the night in search of prey. With every step he took he invited ambush, daring the predator he knew was waiting to show its teeth. It grew impatient. The Lion knew. He could sense it. If it could see him now, then it would see a knight-king at his ease, his Companion guard left in his suite of chambers overlooking the wild ocean, nothing but the symbolic Lion Sword and the Fusil Actinaeus at his hips.

Perception was a powerful tool. Or a weapon, if wielded with skill.

A shudder passed through the castle's stonework as the Lion stalked past a promenade of high, angular windows. A dark flight of Stormbirds and their escorting strike-fighters flew low over the fortress in the direction of the landing strips on Lament, the brute force of the super-heavy flyers' engines rattling the thick sheets of armourglass in their frames. The armourglass had clearly been a recent addition to the bare bones of the original fortress' skeleton. Everything on Muspel looked as if it had been newly renovated, a lie stapled onto the naked half-truth of the old. To strengthen it, yes, there was some truth in that, but also, the Lion suspected, to make it look Imperial when it wasn't. The stones still smelled of mortar and fresh paint. The bright tapestries that hung from the walls were noticeably curled upwards from the ground, revealing where they had been rolled in storage aboard a IX Legion cruiser prior to their hanging.

Halfway down the promenade the Lion slowed his pace and turned to watch the aircraft, left hand hovering over the holster grip of his plasma-fusil. The drab outlines of the craft and even the noise of their engines became progressively washed out as they descended deeper into the rain.

The passage ahead funnelled into a bartizan, a high-windowed corner turret that divided this segment of the Vaniskray from the next, overlooking the island and the stepped tiers of its fortifications below.

A heavily armed detachment of human soldiers held the gatehouse leading to the castle's south-easterly wing, as well as the staircase up to the topmost tier of battlements and the Vaniskray's anti-air batteries. Four squads of Muspellian irregulars armed with autorifles and a sprinkling of special weaponry idled behind collapsible plasteel barricades and around portable heaters, hunched over canteens and smoking Iho-sticks. A pair of tracked Rapier batteries mounting multi-lasers had been set up to cover the approach to the roughly pentagonal bartizan. A pair of bored-looking gunners slouched behind the thick mantlets of their guns.

The officer of the watch was a bulky man in the bronzed carapace and scarlet livery of the Muspellian regiments, a waxed cloak fluttering in a loose wind behind him, but his clean-cut appearance and captain's insignia suggested that his birthworld was elsewhere. The Muspellian units were as yet too raw to have minted an officer cadre of their own, and from all that the Lion had heard and seen they were fundamentally unsuited to high rank.

The captain gazed blankly through the obtuse wedge of tall, toughly glazed windows as though wallowing in melancholia, watching the rain, accompanied by a proclamator, a vexilarius, and the rest of the standard Imperial Army five-man command complement.

At the Lion's approach he turned from the sodden black vista and saluted.

‘I see that you've upped the Legion's deployment to the Sheitansvar. Lord lonson,' he said. 'Should I be concerned?'The captain smiled, his expression masked somewhat by the gross disparity in height between himself and the Lion, and by the clinically electric lighting in the bartizan. 'My superiors grow nervous, you know.’

'Their feelings are beyond my power.'

The captain turned away, gazing fixedly through the embrasure into the muted lights and rain. 'Do you know something of what’s coming to this world?’ he asked. 'Is that why you're so adamant on fortifying this island?'

'What is your name, captain?'

'Manev. Lastoi Manev.'

'What do you know of what is coming?'

The captain shrugged. ‘*Look*.' he said, and pressed his finger to the

armourglass pane. 'A Thunderhawk transporter. A pattern Nine if I'm not mistaken. With some kind of Land Raider variant in its underclaws by the looks of it.’

'It is a Spartan.'

'Ahh. Manev has never seen a Spartan.’ The captain sighed as a sudden fireball consumed the Thunderhawk and its escorting fighters, drenching his pale, hideously black-veined face with light. 'A pity that he never will.'

III

Aravain charged through the flame-lit passageway, the subtle maze of corridors that served to turn the uninitiated from the sanctum of the Dreadwing situated at its heart.

'Redloss!'

He ran flat out, his secondary heart beating in perfect counterpoint to the rhythm of the first, his third lung straining to provide the oxygen for such a power-hungry physiology as that of a Legiones Astartes at full tilt.

'Redloss!'

At a right-angle bend, he cannoned into the wall rather than slow down, and carried on running

'Redloss!'

A squad of Legion auxilia in the maroon fatigues of the Claristan Grenadiers blocked the corridor ahead of him. They' were facing away from him, lasguns to their shoulders in marching order, moving up in two ordered files of five.

’Make way,’ Aravain yelled. 'Make way by order of the-’ A tremor of premonition closed Aravain's throat.

The Claristans turned, swung up their lasguns, and opened fire.

Forced beams of super-hot, cherry-red las stitched the corridor, blackening the walls and leaving steaming welts on his armour carapace. Holding his forearm over his face like an armoured visor, he charged into it. With his free hand he deactivated his bolt pistol's mag-lock and drew it. With his psychic intuition he felt for the presence of the men without needing to risk exposing his eyes. His mind's touch recoiled from the void chill that enwrapped the men. Their psyches were present but had been forcibly suppressed and suborned to an alien mind's control. He recalled the sanction

carried out upon those touched by the khrave on Indra-Sul: death, now, would be a mercy.

'For the Emperor!' one of the men cried, as he fired down the corridor on full-auto.

'For the Lion,' another roared.

Aravain put them down with snap-shots, guided by the light of their soul-fires, and was rewarded by a series of wet-meat explosions that saw both of those fires go out.

A full-power round, sun-hot and screaming with intensity, drilled into his plastron. Energy-dissipating ceramite layers dispersed the killing force of the impact, leaving a black scar as large as two interlocked fists, but preventing it from penetrating more than a millimetre or so into the plate. It left the shot with power enough to stagger Aravain backwards and crack the side of his head on the bulkhead.

Aravain's curse was consumed fully by the snarl of his battleplate as it drove him to his feet. The Claristans charged towards him.

He brought up his bolt pistol.

A tingle of forewarning held his finger off the trigger, and a split second later a blizzard of gunfire tore the mortal troopers apart. The narrow corridor contained and magnified the tertiary detonations of the mass-reactive spray, leaving precious little of the lightly armoured troopers intact.

Farith Redloss strode down the corridor, sticky human residue clinging to the heavy ceramite plates of the Dreadbringer's harness. He offered Aravain a crimson gauntlet.

'I heard you shouting, brother.'

Aravain took the offered hand and allowed the other knight's armour to share the strain of hauling him fully to his feet.

'Dreadwing protocols have been activated,' he panted.

'Do you think me unaware?' Redloss looked at his hands. His gaze drifted back to the mortal soldiers he had so straightforwardly massacred. 'They were ours. What is happening, brother?'

A line of screed blinked steadily in the screen sunk into the raised ring of Aravain's gorget. It was in the code idiom of the Order of Santales, and had appeared in his systems mere moments ago, flagged with the high preceptor's seal.

'The santales will kill a forest overnight,' he said, speaking aloud as he

translated the message, 'attacking from a thousand vines at once.'

Redloss frowned, his unhelmed face filmed with mortal human blood, but then answered.

'Though there is but one root.'

'A root that can be culled with fire and poison.'

Redloss made the sign of the santales. 'This way, brother.'

IV

Alert klaxons had turned the command deck red. Blast doors, automatically triggered in the event of a boarding action, rolled shut in spite of the crew's strenuous efforts to override them. Armoured legionaries took up fire positions in crow's nests overlooking the multiple-tiered decks, lenses glaring green from within deep hoods as the knights switched to tactical overlays to compensate for the sudden, red-tinged dusk. Crowded into the console pits and subdecks beneath them, a few of the mortal officers drew sidearms. But compared to the firepower of a combat squad of Dark Angels, the contribution of a few armed serfs was insignificant at best.

'Report!' yelled Stenius. "Who commanded the lockdown?''

'I don't know, lord,' called a woman with a commander's insignia on the sleeves of her uniform coat, tapping furiously at a haptic display.

'Shut it down.'

'I'm sorry. I'm trying.'

'Find where the command is coming from and kill it.'

'Yes. sir!'

The commander swung her legs under the command dais handrail and dropped into the cogitation pit beneath. A pair of junior staffers immediately stopped what they were doing to rush down the gangway steps to assist her.

'Give me a teleportation lock on the Lion.'

'Sir,' barked the most senior of the remaining command officers. She shook her head. 'Auspex is down. And the teleportarium reports an inability to draw sufficient power.'

'What?'

'Lord Stenius.' A junior officer silting in a high-backed chair amidst an array of communication hardlines and vox-sets turned his way. 'We've lost

all contact with the *Forest Sepulchre*, the *Oaken Throne*, and the *Sar Amadis*. They're dead in the void.'

'What is going on out there? Contact the Lion.'

'Yes, lord." The vox-officer swivelled back to his station.

'Lord Stenius! I think I know what's happening.'

Stenius' armour whirred as it bent its power-assistance to his turn, just as another woman, this one in the plainer livery of a deck chief, sprinted up the steps on the opposite side of the dais. He recognised her as Enith Forsault, a recruit from the more recent intake, but a promising one. Stenius had had it in mind to groom her for an auspectoriae posting on the ship's command staff, ready for the opening when it arose. He had a moment to note the blank expression on her face, before she swung the laspistol she had already unholstered towards his throat and, point-blank, fired.

* * *

V

Bullets spanked off the lowered ramp of the Stormbird *Harpy of Sturnfane*, fizzling off her void shield, driving Sergeant Tiburon Kaye of Squad Martlet back into the cover of its troop bay. Pockets of las-fire sputtered between the ranks of legion, auxilia and Muspellian aircraft parked alongside the runways. To Kaye's eye it was reminiscent of a forest fire, wind-borne embers of some murderous insanity alighting on the minds and the weapons of the readily combustible and catching Across Lament's crowded strips, he saw soldiers falling into prepared cover and unboxing heavy weapons, opening fire on each other, at shadows, and on the legionary forces rapidly moving out to engage them. Kaye felt no surprise in any of this, not even in the fact that the men his brothers were engaging appeared to be their Muspellian auxilia regiments.

Duriel, with the Lion's seal, had commanded him to the planet to prepare for war, and though there had been no obvious sense to underpin the issuance of that command, war was what Kaye had prepared for.

He grimaced as an old Muspellian Xiphon was ripped nose to tail by autocannon fire. A nearby stack of promethium drums went up in a mushroom cloud of flame.

'What are your orders, sir?' said Trigaine.

'The Lion demands we hold this island.'

Kaye unlocked his boltgun and drew it to his breastplate, advancing down the assault ramp as he did so. Unflinching he strode through the Stormbird's void shield bubble, hard slugs and las-beams pinging off his heavy armour. Trigaine and Squad Martlet followed, fanning out behind him as they left the ramp.

'So we hold this island.'

VI

Savine froze. Her eyes widened, her mouth distending in an airless scream. It was as though the observable universe drew in, condensing into a single point of apocalyptic brilliance centred on her. The subtle whisper in her head became a shriek, became a summons, became a supernova of galactic white noise.

Savine Grael, imagist, remembrancer, had no scope for resistance at all.

'Savine?' The technician sitting opposite her reached across the table. 'Are you all-?'

The inner maelstrom passed from her mind and exploded outwards. The invisible wave disintegrated the workbench, then the crewmen, atomically disassembling them before proceeding to annihilate the imagery equipment shelved against the laboria walls.

A future echo turned her head.

A Dark Angel filled the laboria's doorway, pushing aside the light screening curtain with his armoured bulk The warrior raised his bolter.

With a thought Savine crushed his war-plate to a hundredth of its original size. A pinkish fluid dribbled from the armour's compacted softseals as she relinquished her psychic grip and the dead, now hyper-dense legionary thudded to the deck plate. She gave a giddy laugh as she rose. The stool she had been sitting on was the only fixture in the laboria that had remained intact.

A mortal voice from the adjoining corridor screamed an order and a five-centimetre-thick metal door guillotined from the ceiling.

With a flex of psychic muscle she tore the emergency-locked door-hatch from the bulkhead, and the alien mind that now rode the body of Savine

Grael walked free onto the *Invincible Reason*.

* * *

VII

The blast-front from the murdered Thunderhawk rattled the bartizan's armourglazed frontage. The Lion looked on impassively as burning chunks of Spartan rained over the ocean. He scoured the dark clouds for signs of hostile aircraft, or even the tracer glow or missile contrail of a surface-to-air battery, before satisfying himself that whatever blow had brought down the Thunderhawk had come with it from the *Invincible Reason* and been delivered from within.

That was unexpected.

Captain Lastoi Manev turned towards the Lion.

The pane between them creaked before a sudden, inexplicable plunge in temperature. Saltwater rain froze against the armour-glass into twisted caricatures of crystal forms. In the time that it had taken the Legion gunship to die, the mortal's entire posture had altered. He stood fully upright now, shoulders square as though in the presence of a cowed subordinate, his lips hanging somewhere between nervous paralysis and a condescending sneer. His eyes had become black whorls in the fabric of the materium.

'My name is not Manev,' he said, his voice resonating with the depth of a fissure into the warp. 'And you are the Harvest.'

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IMPERATOR SOMNIUM

'May I be the first to congratulate you on your recent victory.'

Once again, the Emperor received the Lion within the staterooms aboard His flagship. The glorious suite of golden chambers elevated Imperial majesty to the point of inconsequentiality. So rich were they, so sumptuously appointed that, like the Emperor Himself, it was difficult to form a distinct impression beyond a sense of humbling and of awe. Once again, the Lion recalled little of the antechambers and grand processionals that had preceded his passage. It was as if a part of him was always here in these rooms with his father, and that part could never leave.

'Thank you, father,' he said.

'You were not the first of my sons to reclaim a place at my side, but your tally of victories is second to no other. Even Horus looks upon them with envy.'

'Horus inspires,' said the Lion. 'Magnus enlightens. Lorgar illuminates. Roboute raises an Imperium in miniature that celebrates his name and yours. I have left as many worlds behind me as any two of my brothers, but I fear that darkness and ash will be the legacy I leave to your Imperium.'

The Emperor considered long, as He often did, before giving an answer.

'In the lime of the Aegypta there was an empress named Hatshepsut. By all

accounts of her that survive she was an equitable and proficient ruler, by the standards of her time. She rebuilt her land in the wake of war and occupation, erecting great monuments and bringing prosperity to her people. She reassembled the Aegypta's navy, using it to re-establish their old empire, and launched military campaigns against the nations who had once been their oppressors.'

’A legacy whose parallels are not hard to see,' said the Lion.

'And yet those who came after her did all within their power to ensure that she would have no legacy. Her name was chiselled from every monument, her every deed and triumph stricken from public record. Even her body was removed from its royal tomb.'

'Why, if her reign was so equitable?'

'Because those who succeeded her desired it. Because sometimes what comes before is too troublesome to be paved over in rockcrete, to amend with a monument to compliance or a golden aquila on an Imperial flag. Sometimes it is enough only that it be destroyed, that no trace of it but darkness and ash be left to endure.'

‘And yet history still remembers this empress.'

‘The Emperor Thutmose the Third did not have his Dark Angels.'

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SEVEN

I

The Lion drew his sword, twisting as he did so to quicken its draw, depressing the activation rune the moment the blade's tip was a disruption field's width from the sheath. The draw instantly became an attack, a horizontal stroke that carved through the Manev thing from shoulder to shoulder.

The captain rippled as the *Lion Sword* went through him. His arrogant smirk stretched to inhuman proportions. It split the man's face and swallowed it. The rest of his wobbling outline drained after it, following the head into a fissure in realspace like the tentacles of some cnidarian slime. The fissure snapped shut, leaving behind it the scent of every world that had ever died by the Lion's hand. The Lion frowned, narrowing his perspective, sensing as a hunter does the spoor of otherworldly energies left by Manev's teleport-hop down the hall. He appeared to the rear of the block of Muspellian troopers, stepping out of nothingness as if from behind an invisible curtain. Tendrils of wicked energies crawled over his singed uniform. His skin was blackened as though he had leapt through a fire,

accentuating the void-black sinks of his eyes and the varicose ridges of his face. His smirk, however, was identical as he drew a bolt pistol from its holster.

'This traitor usurps your rightful governor.' Manev did not shout, but the Lion could sense the psychic power throbbing out of him with every word, soaking into the men around him like the sun's heat on black rocks.

'Stand down,' said the Lion.

The lasguns trained on him wavered.

'You are soldiers of the Emperor!' Manev screamed, and the blunt shock of his power stunned the waverers back into line. 'Kill him!'

The twin multi-lasers on the Rapier batteries at the end of the hall opened up with a sound like a pair of acetylene torches in an oxygen-starved chamber, a hundred sun-hot bolts per second thumping from their racked barrels and converging on the Primarch. Under such a volume of fire, evasion should have been impossible, but the Lion sidestepped the killing beams.

A second later Manev's full platoon opened fire. It was too little, precious seconds too late.

A furious barrage of las-beams flashed across the Primarch's armour as the *Lion Sword* ran a man through. The Lion ripped the artificer blade from the roasted corpse as blood steamed through the soldier's pores. A bayonet stabbed towards his hip joints. The *Lion Sword* spun full circle to parry it, shattering every bone in both arms of his attacker and cleaving the lasgun in half. With something more closely resembling a squashed tentacle than an arm, the Muspellian soldier unclipped a sidearm holster and drew. The Lion smashed the pommel of his sword into the trooper's face, destroying it, then turned, a backhanded sweep of the *Lion Sword*, cutting three men down like weed stems.

A primarch was a god on the battlefield, forged by the gene-alchemy of the Emperor to win Him a galaxy. The Lion had faced down human foes many times, those too ignorant, too proud or too far gone from the path of reason to bend the knee to Terra and accept the Emperor's vision of humanity. Mortal men could not stand before such a being. Dread would freeze them even as the bolt shells hit and the sword blows landed. It was that, as much as their clear martial supremacy, that made the Legiones Astartes the incontestable force that they had become, and the Lion himself had never

known defeat, either in personal combat or in war.

Faced with the wrath of a demigod, the Muspellians should have been lining up to be slain, but whatever force of coercion Manev used to compel them made them fight without fear. They came at the Lion with the ferocity of a mob, kicking at armoured shins, blunting their bayonets on him like maddened wasps.

The Lion hacked downwards with his blade. Displaying unexpected, almost inhuman agility, the soldier that the blow had been meant for jinked aside. He came in under the Lion's guard, then jabbed his bayonet towards his groin. The Lion caught the las-gun's barrel on the side of his knee, turning it across him just as the soldier emptied the charge cell, the shots hitting the soldier to his left. The Lion inverted his sword and plunged it vertically down through the back of the man's neck.

The block-like gatehouse behind the sentry guns shuddered as something hit the massive doors from the other side.

The soldiers did not turn.

The Lion ignored it.

'Fire again!' Manev yelled.

The Rapiers pivoted towards the Lion.

Volleys of las-fire mowed through the mob of troopers. The men made no effort to save themselves, throwing themselves on the Lion even as slashing beams tore them apart. Beams that punched so effectually through flak vests and incinerated mortal flesh skipped off the Lion's armour. Even those shots that glanced his brow barely puckered his skin, leaving behind red welts that his primarch physiology worked immediately to erase. Shedding the dead that had heaped themselves mindlessly about his legs, the Lion lunged towards the closest Rapier mount.

With a flawless conservation of angular momentum, he pivoted on one foot, blade rising and then sliced down. The Lion Sword sheared through the linked multi-lasers, the sublime artifice of the Master of Mankind carving through energy-dampening ceramite layers and plasteel environment coating. The next volley was already on its split-second leap from the charge cell to the emitter crystal, the unfocused energy superheating the phase capacitors and incinerating the gunner. Arcs of frustrated electrical power ripped the weapon platform apart from the inside, cooking the flesh off the secondary gunner and striking down

another three men crowded into the bartizan. A fourth ran screaming his dark red uniform on fire, before ending his life on the rising arc of the Lion Sword.

With a growl, Manev aimed his blast pistol and fired.

The Lion cut the first pair of bullets from the air. One fragment ricocheted into the wall with a small explosion of plaster. Another shot back on an angle, taking out the captain's strategos with a bullet sliver to the shoulder. The vexilarius drew a chamabal sabre. The Lion cut him down before the duellist's blade had left its sheath. Faster than a human should have been able to move, Manev adjusted his aim. Solid bolts hammered into the Lion's breastplate to no avail.

Striking with the hilt of his sword, the Lion knocked Manev's hand aside. Bones exploded in rising sequence as far as the captain’s shoulder, the force wrenching the useless arm out of its socket and corkscrewing the xenos' host from his feet. Manev ploughed face first into the embrasure armourglass with force enough to crack his skull into a hundred pieces.

Implausibly, the captain stood back up. Reaching over his head, he manually snapped his neck back into place.

'Physical weapons are so limiting.' He gestured, and an irresistible force dragged the Lion's arms in to his sides as if he had been wrapped in chain. He raised his hand and the Lion lifted up from the ground, his cloak taking on a bestial animus to claw and snap at his unarmoured face. 'Don’t you agree?'

The Lion strained, his eyes seeing as only a son of the Emperor could, the ephemeral there and then not-there flicker of fine threads about his body. The Leonine Panoply purred as it supplemented his already boundless strength. The immaterial threads stretched, frayed.

'Humanity has grown mighty,' said Manev. 'But you are not entirely human, are you. Lord Jonson?'

With a dismissive gesture, Manev tossed him back.

The Lion roared as the xenos’ power and his own great mass drove him through the bartizan's blast-hardened stone walls. He tumbled out of the crater and onto the floor, the empyreal bonds still light about his torso but weakening every second as his mind focused on the problem of unmaking them.

Manev snarled, and as if in response the mortaring of the ceiling directly

above the Lion disintegrated. Slabs of suddenly loose rock fell through, just as the Lion ripped his arms free of their bonds. He dived to one side and rolled, the rockfall piling up and partially blocking the corridor where he had just been. At the same time, he drew the *Fusil Actinaeus* and trained it on Manev.

Another mighty blow struck the other side of the bartizan's gatehouse door. Manev's face, loosened from his skull by the primarch's blows, slid into a grin.

'That will be more of my thralls. Your Space Marines may be too narrow of mind to be of use to us, but there are hundreds of millions on this world ready to rise up on behalf of the khrave. Why do you think we did not resist when the Blood Angels came?'

'Because you wanted the Imperium to bring its people here.'

The captain's arrogant mask slipped.

'As I hoped you would bring your kind to me,' said the Lion, and fired.

For a split nanosecond a blue-white ribbon of plasma connected each of the Fusil Actinaeus' twin barrels to the puppet captain, before a sunfire explosion incinerated a man-sized sphere of hallway. Armourglass flashed brittle and shattered. Rock ran like promethium. Baalite tapestries disappeared like so much smoke. With its origins in the dark years of Old Earth, the *Fusil Actinaeus*' destructive capabilities far exceeded the modern plasma weapons mass-produced by the forges of Mars.

Seconds after they had been birthed, the conjoined sunblasts faded, firing out waves of skin-searing radiation as they collapsed in upon their own failing cores.

In the midst of their decaying fury stood Manev, hair burned to a crisp and slick with sweat, coronal energies flaring across a psychically projected shield.

'Try again. Lord Jonson.'

The Lion holstered the plasma-fusil and took the *Lion Sword* in a two handed grip, he raised the blade in salute to his foe. 'Then I will finish what I started.'

Before the Lion could follow through, Manev drew a plasma grenade from one of the webbing pouches in his uniform.

'I will come back for your sons,' he said, and depressed the ignition pin.

The Lion was onto him just as the nuclear reaction within the device was

beginning to chain. His hand closed over Manev's, crushing the grenade together with every bone in the captain's hand. It was enough to curtail the reaction, but not to abort it entirely. The micro-sun that birthed in the Lion's palm was a third the expected size for ordnance of the grenade's calibre and about half the usual temperature. The intricately layered ceramiie of his gauntlet trapped the blast at source and turned it. A star's point-blank intensity stripping the meat from Manev’s bones and reducing the latter to a fan of ash upon what remained of the walls. The man's shriek lingered after death, becoming bestial, almost a physical force around the Lion's throat before it faded, reality asserting itself once more.

The Lion flexed his gauntlet, flecks of burned metal snowing from the fingers, and looked around. Everything that had been in his vicinity was dead.

A third blow struck the gatehouse door and this time it gave. The Lion turned towards it as a black Tartaros-pattern power fist drove through the reinforced wood to rip out the latch. The doors gave inwards. Veteran-Sergeant Herodael of the Companions forced his way through. Two more Deathwing Terminators lumbered in behind him, sweeping the corridor with gauntlet-mounted combi-bolters and integrated auto-targeters. Herodael made a swift visual assay of the corridor, every action rendered ponderously deliberate by the bulk of Tactical Dreadnought armour, his helmet's emerald-green lenses flickering with sequential auspex returns.

'This area is clear,' the Lion informed them.

Leaving his brothers to hold the doorway, Herodael moved to the Lion's side. His armour emitted a terrific growl as he took the knee, several tonnes of advanced war-plate supported, for a moment at least, by the power of a single servo-motorised joint. He bowed his head.

'Forgive me, Sire, for not coming to your aid sooner.'

'If forgiveness were mine to freely give then it would be worthless. Your aid was not required, but if your honour compels you to seek forgiveness then you may earn it.'

In a shudder of powered plate, the Companion rose.

'The Muspellian regiments rise up,' said the Lion.

Herodael removed his helmet. 'As do our own, Sire. Battalion-strength forces of human Army auxilia have moved against several hub gates and checkpoints. I've had reports of local armour being deployed against the

Nigris bridge-forts and of infighting amongst the fort's defenders.'

'They have been repulsed?'

'They have. Sire. Knights of the First hold every strongpoint and critical infrastructure on the Vaniskray.'

'We have lured the beast's first attack and bloodied it. Good.'

'Our position is less secure elsewhere, Sire. There are reports of ongoing fighting throughout the rest of the Sheitansvar.'

'This is only the beginning, Herodael. Our foe has yet to commit his full strength.'

'There are two thousand knights still on the island. If we sally from the Vaniskray, we can-'

'Duriel will order them to fall back. His orders are to hold the Vaniskray. That is what I expect him to do.'

'But, Sire-'

The Lion raised a hand to silence him.

He had always been guarded with his humours. 'Those few who knew him took it as a surfeit of phlegm, mistakenly believing his character to take after that of his brother, Dorn. But that was to mistake circumspection for obduracy, aloofness for indifference, and Lion El'Jonson displayed neither. He demanded much and gave but little, yet in his hearts he loved all of his sons as both a lord and a father. His pride in their deeds was surpassed only by the demand he placed on those deeds being exceeded. He had overseen the extermination of countless billions. Such was his duty, his special place within the pantheon of warlike avatars who served their father's ambitions, and though he took no joy from it, nor did he question its justice. His brothers thought him unquestioningly ruthless and they were right. They believed that he would expend any resource, even the lives of his own sons, to prosecute the Imperium's wars, and they were right. They said that he had not shed a single tear at such losses, not even after the annihilation of the Kangda had seen his Legion's strength struck in half, and again they were right.

They thought these things a criticism of him.

When Duriel ordered the withdrawal, many of the Lion's sons would die. This, he knew.

"I have my duties to honour, my son. As they have theirs.'

'Yes, Sire.'

Searching inside the hidden pockets of his cloak, the Lion withdrew a medium-range palm-vox and thumb-activated the transmission switch.

'Stenius, report.' The palm-vox buzzed with static, punctuated by the occasional grizzle of audio distortion. '*Invincible Reason*, come in.' The palm-vox clicked as the Lion switched frequencies, the channel reverting to a scanning hiss. '*Night Lance*, come in. *Blade of Numarc*, respond.'

'A moment, Sire.' Herodael replaced his helmet. Reversed runes flashed across his lens displays as he ran his vox-systems through a series of brief diagnostic transmissions. 'I am receiving no response from any of our off-planet forces. How is that possible?'

'The fleet has been compromised.' The Lion frowned. 'The beast is more pernicious than I allowed for.'

Herodael fell silent, no longer questioning, a knight awaiting the instruction of his liege.

'You, Duriel and Holguin will hold the Vaniskray in my absence. I must return to the *Invincible Reason* and reassert my command of the fleet.'

'Yes, Sire. But how? Teleportation is out and without vox contact there is no way to have a gunship dispatched from the fleet to collect you.'

'The most recent round of deployments will have left a handful here on the planet.'

Manipulating the palm-vox one-handed, the Lion switched to a coded frequency, transmitting a single word to all appropriately keyed receivers in its range - *Santales*.

'I will summon one to the Vaniskray.'

'A moment, Sire.' Herodael raised a hand as he listened in on the action reports that flooded through his battleplate sensorium. 'Intense resistance reported on the Vaniskray roof. Squads falling back. Most likely it is another one of...' he turned to look at the carbonised shadow left against the wall by Manev, '...of those. There is no space on the esplanade to set down a Thunderhawk or a Storm bird. If you are to be extracted then it will have to be from there.'

'Very well.'

The Lion turned towards the staircase that, in addition to the gatehouse choke point, this strongpoint had been constructed to hold. It led up to the topmost tier of battlements and the Vaniskray's anti-air batteries. He strode through, emerging on a wide shelf, pan of an outer staircase that ran from

the mid-level fortifications to the summit emplacements.

A hundred and ten metres below him, night-black waves beat against the rugged rock armour and wooden pilings of the esplanade. Periodic explosions of icy spray swept the road as far as the cliff, reducing the blown-out wrecks of civilian vehicles to the occasional flicker of flame. Staccato firefights illuminated the island keep, but, as Herodael had asserted to him, the Dark Angels held the rock of Uncus in a firm grip.

The view of Nigris, Merigion, Lament, Coccyges and beyond was one of complete chaos. Spot lamps, high-powered beams tattered by rain, swung wildly through the dark. Tocsins wailed. Fortalices screamed with the voices of those trapped inside. Lasweapons and autocarbines chattered, echoing and shrill, more akin to a riot in a penal compound than a night battle. The Lion watched from his point of vantage as the casemates mounted on the Nigris bridge tore each other apart, laser destroyer arrays and quad heavy bolters ripping out in seconds what it had taken the First Legion's auxilia weeks to install.

A gale-force blast of ocean wind pushed against him as he looked up, a world testing its strength against his and finding itself wanting. Bolters barked against the violence. Helm-augmented voices shouted. In opposition, something mighty shuddered the walls of the keep with its footsteps.

'Companions of the Lion,' Herodael roared, reactivating his power fist as he emerged onto the abutment beside him. 'To your duty!'

II

Wiping blood from the fascia plate, Redloss placed his gauntleted palm to the scanner.

A watery green light dappled his war-plate as scanning lasers squirmed beneath his fingers. The embedded electronics trilled with sequential confirmations as they read the hexagrammic runes on the gauntlet ceramite. The fascia slid back to reveal an ivory keypad, which was then shunted forward. Aravain watched, unspeaking, as Redloss punched in a cryptex sequence that would be re-randomised hourly. There was a series of increasingly reverberative *clunks* as bolts were disengaged, followed by pops, fizzles and sub-audial whines as stasis fields, kill-haloes and repulsor

locks powered down.

The door slid open.

Cryonic vapours crawled through the open hatch like a primordial ooze aroused from torpor. It flowed turgidly over the legionaries' boots. Aravain's nose wrinkled at the acrid blend of odours, a cocktail of mechanical and cyborganic preservatives.

Redloss turned to him.

'This is the Dreadwing sacristy. Walk nowhere that I do not walk first.'

Aravain nodded.

Kicking through the clinging vapours, Redloss entered. Barely able to master the nervous energy he felt at standing before that forbidden threshold, Aravain followed.

On a ship better known for its unasked questions, the Dreadwing sacristy was renowned as a repository for the deadliest arcana to have survived Old Earth's Age of Strife unused. Within its multiply secured and ident-locked vaults could be found man-portable atomics, gene-targeted bio-weaponry, unstable plasma devices, singularity drivers, psionic phages - weapons that were so powerful, so cataclysmic in their intent, that the Emperor had deemed them too dangerous for the bulk of His forces to be allowed even to know of their existence. To His First legion alone had He entrusted the secrets of such relic weaponry. With the arsenal that He had entrusted to their keeping, the Dark Angels had at their disposal the firepower to usher in a new Old Night should they, or He, so deSire it.

Who else but the First could have been entrusted with such a responsibility? Who else but the First could be relied upon to inflict that most final of sanctions if so commanded?

The Wolf King boasted to all that he was his father's executioner. He was a deterrent, a hound to snarl from behind a sealed gate, never to be unleashed. What the Lion was to his father did not speak its name so brazenly. For where Russ was a warning, the Lion was a solution. The final solution. He was the Emperor’s exterminator. What the honour of Russ would not abide he would sanction without hesitation. The enemy who might yet be integrated, the adversary whose misguided but noble resistance might be canonised in posterity, these were wars for his brothers to wage. When the First Legion turned their guns upon a foe it was to annihilate without trace, to obliterate beyond all hope of record.

That was the purpose for which the Dark Angels were created and it was the reason that He made them first.

Even the Mechanicum did not know what terrible secrets had been locked away by the Dreadwing in chambers such as these. If the machine-priests of Mars should ever seek to turn against the Emperor's goals of galactic unity, then it would be the weapons of the Dark Angels that would bring them low.

'This way, brother,' said Redloss, declining to whisper as Aravain felt the weight and sanctity of the space demanded, his deep voice echoing through the darkened vault.

Refraining from speaking in kind, Aravain followed in silence.

Thick, adamantium-ribbed columns buttressed the sacristy chamber at regular intervals, braced and girded as if to survive an Exterminatus-level event. This chamber would withstand the destruction of the Invincible Reason herself. Ropes of cabling snaked across the deck plates, concealed under coolant mists to feed the energy demands of stasis chambers, energy fields and magnetic locks. The Emperor's appointed guardians were determined to safeguard his secrets, even from those who had been entrusted to venture this far. It was circles within circles, secrets within secrets, an endless spiral that a functional immortal could walk his whole life and never see the end of.

'Are you a member of the Order of Santales, brother?' said Aravain.

Redloss was silent a moment, walking deeper into the sacristy. 'No. Suffice to say that you cannot store a secret arsenal aboard this ship without the complicity of the Dreadwing.'

Aravain wondered, not for the first lime, at the tangled web of intrigue that served the First Legion in lieu of a true hierarchy. It was labyrinthine, as inscrutable at times to insiders as it was to outsiders, but it served them, and its byzantine structures were as much a deliberate act of obfuscation as they were a side effect of its feudal origins. As he considered this, his path followed Redloss' across a baroque and heavily warded adamantium tomb, akin to a Dreadnought's armoured sarcophagus, only considerably larger and more secure. In addition to the three discrete energy barriers that Aravain could see, binharic runes and warding sigils in all six letter forms of the hexagrammaton, it was bound in heavy duty chains and padlocked. As if sensing his regard, the containment pod emitted a binharised shriek of

pure, mindlocked insanity, the tomb's heavy doors forcing against the outer padlock. The fear response had been carved from Aravain's psyche as a neophyte, but his reaction to that shriek went straight for the butchered endings that the legion's chirurgeons had left in its place.

In the grim lettering of the Dreadwing and the Ironwing, Aravain read the warning script.

'What is in here?'

'I don't know,' said Redloss.

'You are master of the Dreadwing. How can you not know?'

'There are secrets in this sarcophagus that are beyond even me. This tomb demands both a forge-wright of the Ironwing and an officer of the Dreadwing to unseal. I have no idea what is inside. Come.'

Redloss turned aside from the tomb, stalking through the cryo-vapours until he came to a huge adamantium vault. The doors were as ornate as any gateway to a prehistoric city of the dead. The metal had been carved with santales vines, the rendered creepers climbing over and over one another in an endless, chaotic spiral. It shimmered with condensation, despite the deep cold, as though whatever was interred within emitted its own almost undetectable heat. The Dreadbringer presented a thick iron key and inserted it in a concealed lock. Aravain felt an unpleasant itching at the back of his mind, a static tingle that was as distinct from the probing of a warm, living psyker as the touch of a servitor was from that of a human being. The authorisations systems were backed up by some manner of psi-arcana. The Emperor had proscribed the use of such dread technologies, well before the advent of the Great Crusade.

It scanned him. Aravain fought down the impulse to resist.

The vault emitted a flat, atonal chime, apparently satisfied in what its probes had gleaned of his licence and intention. The door hinged silently open, and for once Redloss himself gave in to proper reverence: the awe that even the avowed agnostic can feel in the presence of such breathtaking weaponry, the closeness that only instruments of mass destruction can bring a warrior to a god.

'The armourium of the Order of Santales.'

Redloss stepped aside.

The Codicier raised his hand to hover over the imprisoned weaponry. Not since the darkest hours of Old Night had mankind's mastery of the killing

sciences been explored in such intimate minutiae There was no consistency of design or uniformity of function. Nothing in this vault had ever been, or would ever be, immortalised in the sequences of a Standard Template Construct. Every grip, sleeve and neural shunt that his fingers brushed belonged to an artefact that was unique in this galaxy. Each was a singular terror, born from the infinite creativity of humanity's apogee and never to be repeated since. Neural whips, lonophoric eradicators. Personality phages. Gemynd blasters. Glass-walled grenades that carried torpid, warp-borne mindworms inside. These were weapons that attacked the mind and, whether one believed in such notions or not, the soul. Built at the pinnacle of mankind's supremacy over the laws of physics, many had been constructed to eradicate not only their victim's physical body but its reflection in the empyrean as well, weapons of such unholy potency that not even the memory of the slain could remain intact.

The relic Aravain finally settled upon was a monstrous ancestor of the bolter family, massive-barrelled, fed by a multitude of plastek hoses that Redloss silently proceeded to clamp into Aravain's armour's power plant. Superficially it resembled a heavy bolter, albeit heavier, built to be wielded by Men of Iron or some other breed of upgraded soldier in the millennia before mankind had raised its transhuman Legions. The stamp it bore was recognisably Terran, though of no lore that still existed today. It was only as Redloss clamped an ammunition hopper to Aravain's girdle plate and started manually feeding the belt to the magazine that its more fundamental differences became apparent. The high-calibre shells emitted a glow that burned Aravain's psychic sight, even as he closed his eyes and turned his face away.

'Yes,' Aravain said, feeding his gauntlet reverently through the grip loop on the cannon's upper barrel and feeling its weight. His harness suspensors whirred as they spread the immense load across his power-armoured frame. 'This will put the fear of the First into them.'

'Good hunting, brother,' said Redloss.

'You will not be accompanying me?'

'I must wait here for the rest of your order. When the Lion calls on me again, I will join you in this battle.'

Aravain raised the muzzle of his heavy weapon in salute. 'For the Lion and Caliban.'

Redloss nodded in kind.

'Do your duty, brother.'

III

From prow to stern, a plague of insanity swept the *Invincible Reason*. Crewmen ripped up workstation chairs, tearing their own muscles in the process of breaking them from the deck plates, before using them to brutalise their stations. Others ran screaming through the passages as though on fire. Armsmen turned on phantasmal tormentors, unloading entire clips of autoguns and draining the charge cells of lascarbines into whatever it was that their nightmares perceived. But where Savine Grael and a handful like her walked, madness coalesced like accreting stardust into the hard core of something focused and baleful. Officers in blood-drenched fatigues ceased their mindless butchery and fell in behind her Deckhands and serfs abandoned their petty acts of vandalism. Army personnel and Legion armsmen were drawn inexorably towards the gravitic pull of her psychic power.

And so while the legion, and those few humans sufficiently strong of will to resist, were engaged suppressing a thousand insignificant acts of anarchy and mayhem, half a dozen small but growing forces converged, as if by conscious command, on critical sections of the ship.

Through the tendrilous organo-psychic neural architecture that bound the khrave into a unitary consciousness, half in and half out of the warp, Savine was simultaneously aware of the same occurring on every other vessel of the Dark Angels fleet. And on Harvest itself.

The arrival of the Legion had been unexpected, had forced them to gather their minds in conclave, but this would work out to their benefit, this was an opportunity. The Imperium was sprawling and careless, as so many stellar empires before them had been on their anarchic journey towards the pinnacle of their powers. And where there was chaos, where there was distance and confusion, there would be food for the khrave. The addition of the *Invincible Reason* and her fleet would allow them to project their will over countless more worlds.

Her extended mind drew back to the immediate needs of her physical host as a hail of bolter shells hammered down from an overlooking gantry.

The high-explosive shells ripped through her scantily armoured thralls. Soldiers and crew serfs yelled as they hit the deck - oaths to the primarch and the Emperor that made sense to them if no one else - and crawled into cover. Those who had weapons used them, squeezing off shots that sparked from the underfloor and high rails of the gantry, or else ricocheted harmlessly from hulking legionary armour.

Savine had led her thralls into an enginarium storage bay on her way to the launch bay. It was, she had been aware, the perfect site for an ambush, and she had psychically probed the route accordingly before satisfying herself that it was empty of foes. The failure of her sayings was more a cause for curiosity than annoyance.

The legionary did not deign to take cover from her thralls' fire. He stood square on, taking hits, not even angling his body or dropping to one knee to minimise his profile, and mowed the storage bay with bolter fire.

Bolt-rounds ripped human bodies to pieces, perforating the storage containers they sheltered behind and blowing them to smithereens, bloody clouds mingling with aerosolised chemicals and explosions of grain. Every thrall that perished was a tiny scream driven into the ether, a shiver of psychic energy that nourished and strengthened her.

Leaving her thralls to drown the solitary Dark Angel with targets, she strode on, shells bending around the bubble-like barrier of psychic energy that encompassed her.

Confronted by a shielded adversary, the warrior's instinct was to break it. Turning from the inconsequential horde of thralls, the legionary poured the full weight of his tire into her. She grinned as bolt shells whipped around her, accelerated to hyper-relativistic speeds before firing off in random directions, blasting through doorways, bulkheads, exterior plating and several thousand kilometres of realspace before the shells' internal mass-reaction fired. One shot in twenty struck her shield at the precise angle to penetrate, impacting with such force that they were crushed out of their third dimension, transmuted into flat discs that came apart like antimatter fireworks under the weight of their own paradox.

With a voice-augmented growl, the legionary drew his bolter in to his chest plastron and withdrew, backing into one of the myriad passageways that fed the gantry.

Savine frowned after him, but before she could consider what the warrior's

retreat might portend, a second hail of bolter fire tore into her thralls from behind.

She turned to look as an identically armoured and robed figure strode from the shadowed bulk of the storage containers, but for his position on the hangar floor it could have been the same knight. Even his thoughts were indistinguishable. The minds of humans flickered like candles, shaped and coloured by their inability to hold fast to a single thought for long. Those of the Dark Angels were hard and self-contained, gemstones forged under ferocious pressures whose only thoughts were of self-sacrifice and duty.

They offered little purchase, and promised meagre sustenance.

A third legionary, identical again to the other two, appeared from a door hatch. Savine ignored him. She had thralls enough to absorb his fire and more importantly his time while she destroyed the warrior in her path. She could always subvert more once she approached the launch bay.

The legionary behind her raised a pistol-sized weapon in a two-handed grip. Despite its small physical size, its light blazed in the empyreal realm like the pilot light of a heavy flamer, for the first time since the host-mind had manifested its will into this body, she hesitated.

The knight opened fire.

IV

'Khrave xenoform engaged.'

‘Mind-slave or root-host?'

'It is the principal mind. Standard-issue ammunition is ineffective. Brothers Beraint and Cerond and Brother-Sergeant Kaliel have been slain.'

‘She is heading for the launch bay.’

'Moving to intercept.'

‘Has there been any word from the preceptor or the Lion?’

'No, brother. Standing orders apply.'

The vox-chatter filled Aravain's helmet, positional markers blinking in the augmented display. Tristerix, this is Cruciatum. I am closing on your position from starboard.'

However it was that the khrave root-host had managed to infiltrate the Dark Angels flagship, it was well and truly unveiled to his senses now. Aravain had never stood before the glory of the Emperor, but those heroes

who had done so all spoke haltingly of the experience, as though the impression left by Him on the psyche was too deep to be revisited and experienced again with clarity.

His sensation of the root khrave, though malignant of source, felt similar.

He frowned, armoured by duty as he braced the weight of his gun and targeted the tidal surge of infected crewmen rushing up from the storage bay towards him.

He pulled the trigger.

A spray of explosive psychoactive rounds incinerated the tightly packed mortals, body and soul, each individual screaming into a pyre that burned across two realms. Aravain counted twenty-five men armed with stub pistols and wrenches A second after he had counted them they were gone, every ripple and echo that suggested they had ever existed eradicated, and even Aravain's eidetic recall struggled to conjure any details of their appearance: except that there had been twenty-five, armed with stub pistols and wrenches.

An itch walked up his spine, and in spite of his discipline Aravain struggled to suppress a shudder as he lowered the weapon and continued his advance.

Sparks gouted from torn conduits and vandalised fascia consoles. Ductwork hung from the ceiling. The Invincible Reason was destroying herself from within, like a living organism, her own immune system driven wild by a viral contagion. As structurally sound as she appeared from the outside, the flagship would be out of service for months after this, even if the khrave could be uprooted swiftly.

A shriek that was both human and alien, physical and unreal, echoed through the torn innards of the ship

The khrave of Indra-Sul had been many weeks dead, a subject of the Mechanicum Biologis, by the time Aravain had managed to see it. In spite of its preservative stasis, the xenos parasite had still been an abhorrent deviation of the honiminid form. It had been three metres tall, spread across two tables, its long-limbed body sheathed in a reflective carapace that shared something of the aeldari in its loathsome grace. Its head had been a featureless ovoid, like a black egg, lacking in any kind of orifice for ingestion, respiration or the transmission of sensory information. How it had sustained itself, how it had perceived the universe from within that

hermetic shell had been a mystery to the Biologis, but according to the accumulated lore of the Order of Santales the khrave were a race who dwelt, and fed, at least in part in the realm of the psychic.

From what Aravain had been able to glean, the creature that Corax had slain had been an engorged and physically atrophied specimen, already on the wane having exhausted the psychic resources of its world.

What he faced here was different, an alpha xenos mind in the full power of its ascendency.

Aravain reopened the Santales cenobium frequency as something that his brother had said over the vox came back to him.

'Tristerix, this is Cruciatum - did you say 'she'?'

'*It is the remembrancer, Cruciatum. Savine Grael.'*

He muted the vox-pickup before he could say something he might later regret, recalling as he did the fleeting contact between Savine and the corpse aboard the Obrin. Was that what khrave domination required? Physical proximity, however brief?

Had he set the khrave loose aboard the Lion's ship?

He broke into a run.

V

A Dark Angel sidestepped from behind a modified cargo Atlas, his aura as black as hate, and raised a hideously robust assault cannon. The light streaming from its radiators and vanes was acid on the retinas. The legionary flicked out a switch from the weapon's upper handguard, its charge stacks emitting a rising hum before discharging a torrent of forced energy pulses into the stampeding thralls. A single, instinctive moment of recoil spared Savine. Dead bodies tumbled around her where live ones had been running, the energy blasts tearing through the web of organo-psychic tendrils that bound them. The pain of it was like nothing she had ever known, and she had outlived the fall of star-empires and the birth pains of gods. It was as though every nerve in her distant, physical body were being attacked with a flaming torch.

With a roar she lashed out, not purely with the mind but, in her distraction, flinging out an arm, a telekinetic battering ram that sent the massive Atlas shrieking sideways on its tracks before crushing the Dark Angel between it

and the wall. She clenched a fist, howling in anger and pain, and the entire tank and the legionary behind it crumbled into black sand.

Savine dived for the deck as a whoosh of psychically coloured flame licked towards her. Another legionary stepped out from behind a baffled screen, a silver mistletoe talisman falling from the folds of his hood as he raked his flamer-type weapon back and forth. Thralls screamed and rolled over on the deck, frantically patting at their clothes, and Savine felt every iota of their agonies. Holding onto the psychic feedback until it felt as though her bones would melt, she rounded on the legionary.

The air ignited, becoming a roiling fireball that ripped through the storage bay as it swelled. It crumpled the bulkheads, melted stanchions, brought gantries and derricks crashing in. The legionary attempted to throw himself clear, but was incinerated.

Savine howled in frustration.

All of the Dark Angels her mind had touched aboard this ship were hard-edged and cold to her sight. But those wielding the warp weapons were almost invisible. They cloaked themselves somehow, an anti-psychic field generated by the sigils on their war-plate, or a protean veil woven into the fabric of their hoods or the padding of their helmets. If she lost sight of them, even for a moment, then they were gone, and the knights were doing all in their power to remain hidden.

Staccato barks of explosive fire, conventional bolter rounds, fell amongst what was left of her thralls, whole shells and blast debris bending and rippling across her psy-shields.

She had been herded by fire, driven into a subsector of the enginarium seldom visited by mortals and which, even after Savine's six months aboard ship and the khrave’s access to the memories of a thousand minds, was a black space.

She was alone, and she was lost.

Her scream rose into the suprasonic, warping metal and armaplas until bolters refused to fire and audial dampeners exploded into sparks from the sides of legionary helmets. Dark Angels fell from positions of hiding with screams of pain. Savine stalked towards a warrior who lay half paralysed on the deck, soaked in the promethium jelly and accelerant that was leaking from the ruptured canister on his back.

Savine's lips drew back into a snarl, psychic corposant licking the splayed

fingers of her hand as she prepared to burn the warrior alive.

VI

Aravain had been in the corridor, coming at the storage bay on an oblique, when the khrave's witch-scream had burned out his vox-link to the cenobium. He stumbled into the bay, liven with the muffling effect of walls and a few hundred metres of distance, the aftershocks were still ringing in his ears. The former remembrancer was the last thing standing, stalking towards the downed knight. Aravain levelled his cannon at the woman and opened fire.

The psychically charged shells punched through the host's barriers, detonating under the mangled wreckage of the enginarium bay as she sought cover. With his own precognitive gifts, he tracked the blurred streak as the khrave-host sped towards the nearest exit corridor. He raked the path ahead of her. but whatever powers he possessed the khrave's were of an order greater, and the last shells in the cannon s hopper banged off the heavy steel frame of the door as Savine vanished through it.

'Cruciatum.' breathed the warrior that the khrave-host had been set to finish. Aravain knew him only by his order identity, Viscium. His weapon's casing had split, and even had it been operable both of its fuel canisters had been ruptured in battle with the khrave-host. 'Did you kill her. brother?’

Aravain shook his head.

The other knight struggled to rise, failed. 'By the dark woods of fair Caliban, we wounded her, brother.’ He groped blindly for Aravain's hand. Lowering the emptied cannon to the deck, Aravain guided the other's hand to his forearm and clasped it in a firm, warrior's grip. 'Kill her, brother, for the Lion.'

Aravain released the knight's grip. Viscium's arm dropped to the deck. The knight was dead.

VII

The Vaniskray's summit was a fortress in miniature, an urban tangle of turrets. Hydra autocannon batteries and battlemented walkways. Castellated rotunda housed laser destroyer arrays and the hab-sized scaffold of charge

cells and capacitors required to fire a weapon capable of knocking a capital ship from orbit. The shells of void generators rose like iron molluscs against the keep's angular skyline. Ropes of armoured and insulated cabling fed their enormous demands for energy, liven with the shields down - for embattled though they were, no force yet challenged them from orbit - the thick, muggy scent of water vapour and ozone filled the battlements and static lingered on every metallic surface. While most of the rooftop was given over to armoured conduits for the rapid deployment of infantry and, more usefully, support staff for the heavier defensive systems, the aegis of anti-air and anti-orbital firepower also served to protect landing facilities for a mid-size Imperial transport, equivalent to a Thunderhawk gunship. An 'X' of roads crossed the landing pad, each branch terminating in the super-heavy vehicle elevators enclosed within the corner towers. They were wide enough to allow a Hydra flak tank to pass in each direction without colliding Access from the north-easterly wing was blocked by a steel portcullis. It acquiesced to the Lion's presence with a hiss and rose into the wall as he passed.

Five knights in the mixed symbols of a dozen squads held position in the cover of some corrugated steel crates that had fallen from the back of an upturned Taurox. Their fire discipline was superb in spite of the anarchy, firing in waves whereby one warrior reloaded while his brothers emptied their magazines. Fifty of their brothers lay in states of dismemberment along the X of the roads, scattered like the petals of a black flower to line the approach of a god. Plates of scorched and mangled ceramite trembled with the metronomic footfalls of their destroyer.

One of the knights sheltering behind the Taurox rose from cover, a missile launch tube on his shoulder, and fired. The krak missile streaked over the debris-strewn road, between the flanking battlements, looping upwards before thumping into the target's void shields. It vanished with implosive brilliance, the field bubble rippling as the kinetic energy was absorbed and devoured.

With a strident blast of its horns, *Rubrum Viator*, Warhound of the Legio Osedax, strode through the pinprick explosions of bolter fire.

The roadway cracked under its splayed, adamantium tread. Fourteen metres high at its hunched shoulders, limbs backward-jointed, it moved with a predator's gait that devoured the road at a rate at odds with its size. It

crushed a parked Troika cargo truck underfoot. Rain speckled its dorsal void coverage, the occasional oil-on-water ripple of multilaser-fire, suggesting that at least one loyal human soldier still manned the turrets of the Vaniskray's roof. With a howl of autoloaders and rotating barrels, *Rubrum Viator* opened up with its mega-bolter.

A hail of heavy bolter rounds chewed through the Taurox's hull with a sound like a tin can being mutilated with a screwdriver. Two of his knights were killed instantly, mauled beyond even the recognition of their own brothers. A third, the warrior with the missile launcher, had his arm carved from his body. He fell to the ground, the launch tube rolling away from him. In defiance of futility and in disregard of pain, he drew a bolt pistol from its thigh-plate mag-lock and fired up at the advancing Titan. Specks of brilliance popped around its snarling wolf head as mass-reactive shells died against its shields, metres away from its armour.

Another knight ran to gather up the missile launcher, the warrior's discipline an inspiration as his last standing brother provided cover for him with bolter fire. They fell back to the crates.

'For the Lion!'

Herodael stomped onto the road, advancing without consideration for his own safety into the Titan's arc of fire. If there was one thing on the world that could legitimately threaten the life of one of the Emperor's sons then it was the god-engines of the Legio Osedax. And so the Deathwing Oathbearer pushed the inertial stabilisers of his Tartaros-pattern war-plate to their limits to put himself between it and his liege.

His two Companion brothers followed suit, assuming flanking positions, three sets of combi-bolters guided by the hands of Legion veterans stippling the Titan's shield with fire. But for all their firepower, the Terminators were not nearly well-enough equipped to injure a Titan. Even a Scout Titan. Their armour, while impervious to almost anything found in the arsenals of mortal men, would not be proof against anything worse than a grazing hit from a Vulcan mega-bolter.

The only thing that could stand against an Imperial Titan was another Titan.

'I stand amongst the honoured dead,' Herodael intoned, voice deepened and strengthened by his armour's augmitter systems.

'Beyond the reach of uncertainty and doubt,' said the second.

'Beyond the frailties of honour and flesh,’ spoke the third.

'Where only duty remains,' Herodael finished.

Another krak missile exploded against the Warhound’s shields, detonating above the hip joint with force enough penetrating the barrier to draw a whine of compensatory power-draw from the motors. The Titan swayed, forced to adjust its stride, buying the Dark Angels perhaps a second and a half of life.

The knight dropped his spent launcher and picked up a bolter.

'Fall back!' the Lion roared. 'This beast is beyond you.'

Physically incapable of resisting a direct command from the Lion, the two knights rose from cover, firing upwards from the chest as they withdrew to the portcullis. The third knight hastened after them, delaying only to reload his boll pistol one-handed, slamming the clip in against his thigh and limping to link up with his brothers.

The Companions he did not order to withdraw. They, alone amongst all the galaxy’s sentient peoples, could have defied such a command had it been given.

Bringing the cross guard of his sword to his lips, the Lion met *Rubrum Viator's* red-glazed eyes through the quillons. The god-engine's machine-spirit growled, shrugging off the gnat-bite efforts of the Companion Terminators as it heeded the Lion's challenge. Steam hissed from shoulder vents as khrave-dominated moderati shunted power to its plasma blastgun. A Titan-killer, the arm weapon glowed blue-white, like a star newly born to the firmament. seething under the rain.

The Lion shifted his weight. From attack, defense, and from defense, attack: an endless and unbreakable spiral of guard and offensive.

He made no movement.

A barrage of twinned blasts haloed *Rubrum Viator* in shield flare, the oxygen-splitting crack of lascannon fire replaced by the hailstone hammer of heavy bolters on naked armour, as the voids were battered down. The now unshielded Warhound pivoted, arm weapons tracking, just enough to meet head-on the Deathstrike missiles corkscrewing out of the sky.

The explosion lifted Herodael from the ground and sent him skimming back up the road like a pebble. The two Companions, several metres less advanced, were buffeted but held their footing. Their combi-bolters tracked the sky, ever wary of the unknown when the wellbeing of their primarch

was in play.

The Lion calmly resheathed his sword as *Harpy of Slurnfane* descended on vertical thrusters. The downwash of its powerful engines drove back the collected rainwater like a messiah coming into land. Crossfire from a dozen or so khrave-controlled gun nests spasmed and flared across her void shields. The aircraft was heavily armoured, but she had been designed to repel glancing blows from an enemy's air defences whilst dropping at speed, not descending into enfilade in an urban battlefield.

Angling in her wings as she deployed landing claws, the *Harpy* dragged herself one hundred and eighty degrees about her dorso-ventral axis to turn her larger rear hatch towards the Lion. The ramp began to descend while still in mid-flight as, in contempt of the adjoining fortifications it crushed beneath its span, the Stormbird touched down. Shields flickered like a geomagnetic aurora as the knights of the Third Order's 15th Company pounded down the ramp. Squads Naiant, Acroc, Urinant and Martlet assumed overlapping positions around the screaming bird. They opened fire on the attacking gun towers, serried lines of explosive retribution, grimly delivered, joined a moment later by the heavy blasts of the *Harpy's* own defensive hard points.

One legionary remained at the top of the hatchway, bolter held low in one hand, pointed to the ground.

Sergeant Kaye marched from the foot of the ramp and threw a salute, spectacularly unmoved by the devastation around him.

'I require your Stormbird, sergeant,' said the Lion.

'It was never mine, Sire.'

‘You will answer to Castellan Duriel until I return to command you otherwise.'

'Yes, Sire.'

The Lion strode onto the ramp.

'Trigaine,' he said.

'Yes, Sire,' said the legionary who had elected to remain aboard.

'You are to come with me.'

VIII

Aravain switched to preysight, the view through his helmet's narrow lenses

turning a hard, primeval green, populated by floating threat locks and passive motes of screed. He raised his sword, the cold fire limning its edge going entirely undetected by his war-plate's extensive suite of sensoria.

‘*Aravain.*’

The voice rang from the bare steel that stretched out from him, ahead and behind.

'*Help me. Aravain!'*

He continued along the service corridor, sword leading, threat auspex clicking as his preysight slowly de-pixelated the walls from black to brown to forest green. He paused, repositioning his guard to peer into the bottomless well of a maintenance shaft.

Nothing.

'*It's me. Aravain. Savine. From the* Obrin *mission. You and your brothers have hurt it. It's gone now but I don't know for how long.*'

’I can see your mind, parasite,' said Aravain. 'Do you think you can deceive me with such outright lies?'

Laughter echoed, the voice deepening and darkening as it sank through the shadows.

'*And I see you. Aravain!'*

He turned, sword brought up high to guard, but the corridor was empty.

‘*Your brother hunters shielded their thoughts with technology, but your mind is an open page.*'

‘I am a Librarian of the Firewing, and a knight of the Order of Santales. I can protect my own mind.'

‘*Can you, now?*' The shadows laughed. Aravain felt it as a prickling cold across his temples.'*How old were you when the Imperium killed your father, Aravain?*'

'Enough!'

Aravain raised a hand as though to ward against a physical blow and focused his mind, reciting an old woodland prayer once taught to a small boy by a witch of the Northwilds. Whether the old words held some power in themselves or it was the act of mental discipline involved in speaking them, it helped. The prickling sensation eased.

'The Imperium did not kill my father.’

'*It didn't tie the noose, but it did drive him from his castle, destroy his forest, raise an arcology hive on his land. As it drove mine to the bottle and*

an early grave.'

'You will find no resentment in me, xenos. It is my sole joy to serve the Emperor of Mankind.'

'*How do you think this hunt ends, Aravain? With my death? Savine is but a host. Kill her and you kill a woman whose only crime was to harbour a petty hatred of you, and when I return it will be from within the body of another*.'

The vox ground rough static in his ear.

'*To all Knights of Santales, this is the Lion. I am inbound to docking bay twelve. All who are able are to assemble there*.'

There was no sign-off or request for confirmation. The frequency simply cut off.

'Kill her and I swear you will be looking over your shoulder until the end of your days,' Savine hissed as she lunged from the darkness.

One moment the shape in front of him was a mess of pipes and shadow, the next it was bulldozing him into the wall. The metal crumpled and deformed under his weight, ceramite gouging out oily sparks. Before he had a chance to counter, Savine punched him in the girdle plating. He heard the bones in her hand shatter, but so too did his armour, the blow lifting him off the ground and bouncing him off the bulkhead. He landed on his breastplate, winded, one lens smashed where he had headbutted the deck. The other stuttered, still struggling for a threat lock as Savine straddled his backplate and ripped his helmet from its clasps. Torn electrics and microfluidics bled onto the back of his neck as Savine placed a cold palm on his head. With every discipline of the Librarius and every catechism of mental fortitude taught to the aspirants to the Firewing, he raised his psychic barriers, knowing even as he did so that they would be insufficient.

With her hand pressed against the back of his head, its empyreal echo pushed through, deeper, shedding its mortal human appearance as it flashed against his mental shields.

He saw an old man, hanging by his neck from the beam of a stone hall.

Light pierced his imagined eyes, too bright.

He looked up.

In place of smoke-blackened wood beams, he saw a young galaxy filled with stars, the gaseous caul of creation still shimmering across its virgin brightness.

An old man, hanging.

He saw through eyes not his own, iron pyramids on steel-grey worlds, worlds blanketed in the desiccated corpses of aeldari and orks and a race that looked almost like men but for the millions of years' disjunction between their evolutions.

An old man.

He saw, not in the wavelengths of light but in the spectra of the nephilic realms, the shimmerings of xenos souls. He saw through the eyes, for want of better terminology, of a creature that had fed on upheaval and strife since the galaxy had been newborn and who, only now, turned its parasitic intellect towards humanity's ascension.

Hanging.

The passing interest of one who had leeched off the lowering empires of prehistory - what greater recognition could the Imperium of Man hope to earn?

Gritting his teeth against the demand to yield, Aravain fought back, uprooting the alien tendrils neuron by neuron from his psyche. The khrave were a species of strife. They fed off division, exploiting mental weakness and mortal deSires, but this one assaulted the mind of a Dark Angel: it would find no fallibility here.

+You cannot fight me.+

+I will fight you until my body fails me, xenos.+

The lobes of his brain clenched like a muscle as they resisted, forcing tendrils of unclean and inhuman thought incrementally but inexorably from his mind.

The visions of primordial devastation became laced with the familiar.

He saw a gathering of knights, hooded and kneeling, in a chamber lit by naked torches. Then another, the stage subtly different, but the participants in their drawn cowls and white surplices eerily unchanged. Another vision came and went, followed by another, and another, like watching a ring of angelic menhirs from a primitive pantheon, standing impervious to the erosion of time as the world around them fell to ruin and was rebuilt and then fell again. It dawned on him that the xenos plundered these memories for the identities of the Knights of Santales, and he felt its frustration as it came to the realisation that even he did not know. He felt himself laugh, not because the khrave lacked the power to rip whatever knowledge it wished

from his brain but because, by the law and practice of the Lion, he possessed none of the knowledge that it deSired.

Savine staved his face into the deck plate, breaking the psychic connection.

'You are going to die,' said Aravain, the taste of coagulated blood in his mouth, 'in the manner of every tyrannical xenoform that stood in the path of humanity before you.’ Before he could stop himself, he thought of the Lion, his one regret in death being that he would not live to muster with the rest of the inner circle to do battle in the primarch's company.

The thought tumbled down a spasmodic residue of organo-psychic tissue and into Savine's host-mind. Her grip tightened on the back of his head, and when she spoke, her voice, for a moment at least, was recognisably that of Savine the remembrancer: embarrassed, awed and afraid.

'The Lion,' she whispered, 'the Lion is coming here,' before smashing Aravain's face one last lime against the deck.

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EIGHT

I

Harpy of Sturnfane came in like a war horse driven hard through the night: hot hull plating lathered by the stresses of battle, engines wheezing. She broke through the sapphire-blue shimmer of the docking bay's coherence field, turbofans angling to vertical, the downwash blasting detritus from the landing apron. Abandoned equipment and untended gurneys blew away like leaves before a summer storm Landing talons crunched into the ferrocrete apron. Lion El'Jonson ducked through the rear hatch, leaving Trigaine to hold the Stormbird, and strode down the ramp even as it lowered.

The hangar was dark. The occasional unsheathed lumen strip flickered, reflecting off the million pieces of glass debris littering the deck. The majority of the Legion's gunships and starfighters had already been void-borne when the attack had come, but a handful of Xiphon interceptors and Pythos scout planes lay in the gloaming like wounded birds, their pinions broken and their bellies split.

The Lion frowned as he stepped off the apron, boots crunching on glass. He had hunted quarry by touch and smell alone, and been stalked through

lightless defiles knowing that the sound of a single breath would be his end.

'You are a less patient hunter than I.'

He drew the *Lion Sword*, slowly, thumbing the activation rune worked into the grip as it came free, bathing twenty square metres of hangar deck in coolly energised light.

The khrave-host stood exposed where she had been waiting for him on the flight deck. Her hair was the colour and animus of flame, her dark eyes drinking in the glow of the *Lion Sword*, yet for all her supernatural features, it was her posture that struck him as most uncanny. Lacking the subconscious cower that betrayed even the bravest of men when confronted by a primarch of the Legiones Astartes she stood straight-backed and haughty, jaw upturned as though she looked up because she chose to rather than because the one-and-a-half metre difference in height between them meant that she had to.

"Did you believe you could hide?' he said. 'I am the Angel of Darkness.'

'Lion El'Jonson,' she said in a voice like grinding glass. 'You grace me with your presence at last.'

The Lion dipped his head. The Imperium would never acknowledge this foe or know the cause of their annihilation from history, and so it was only just that the Lion salute a worthy adversary before their end.

'Savine.'

The woman bared black-veined teeth. 'You know her name?'

'Did she imagine that I did not? Is that the petty resentment that weakened her mind to you?' The Lion shook his head. 'No one is admitted aboard my ship without my approval. Nothing transpires here without my knowledge. I keep no secrets that cannot suffer scrutiny. Malcador knows this as well as I. I requested Savine.'

The khrave-host swayed as though struck.

'Savine has suffered for her shortcomings,' the Lion went on. 'As soon will you. I have already slain one of your kind. Your arrogance in facing me is deeply misjudged.'

'He was young,' Savine hissed. 'Barely six times older than your race. You speak to me of arrogance, while failing to recognise the strength in front of you.'

'Tell me your true name, xenos. I alone will recognise it after your demise."

'It is beyond your ability to pronounce or comprehend. 'Savine' will suffice. She would have enjoyed this moment if she were still here.'

A groan passed through the metal flooring, broken glass twitching until the sheet ice spreading outwards from her feet froze it. There was a shriek of metal tearing through metal, and the Lion turned to look as the Harp)' was dragged screaming off its cradle. Trigaine cried out, hurling himself from the top of the ramp as Savine's eyes pulsed. It was the unconscious gesture of an alien mind, a command that the Stornmbird's howling jets could not defy. The massive aircraft yawed towards the Lion like a reluctant missile.

The Lion dropped flat to the deck and rolled underneath it, the *Harpy* missing by no more than a centimetre as its wing ploughed into the deck. It crumpled as though made of paper, shearing off completely as it flipped and rolled. The opposite wing snapped off, the limbless fuselage careening on, shedding hull plates, tail fins and missile pods as it smashed through the parked voidcraft. At some point it ignited, little more than a beaten cylinder caught within a fireball as it crashed into the far wall.

The Lion rose to his feet without speaking, returning his sword to guard.

'Don't fool yourself into thinking that I believed this would be easy,' Savine hissed. 'You think you are the better hunter, but unlike you I learned something from your battle in the Vaniskray.' Another woman and a man walked out of the shadows to join her, side-lit by the chemical fire that was slowly taking hold of the forward bulkhead. They carried themselves like hyenas, the woman in the padded C.-suit of a pilot, the man in the grease-stained coveralls of a deckhand, but one look was enough to tell the Lion that these were no common thralls.

Savine made a fist and slid an open palm across it, a blade of primal ether growing from her hand as though drawn from a scabbard of air.

'Lord Jonson!' Trigaine barked, assuming a braced firing position with one knee on the landing apron as the other two khrave-hosts drew matching blades.

'For the Emperor!' the Lion roared, surging into the charge as Trigaine opened fire

Light bursts of bolter fire ricocheted between the khrave-hosts' arcane aurae. Savine's form blurred as the air in front of her thickened and reshaped, clumping into an aggregate of psychic energies that she propelled towards the Lion with a thought. It would have punched a hole through an

armoured column, but where a primarch did battle even the warp found itself deformed, and the psychic shockwave broke like water over jagged reefs before sweeping harmlessly across his robes.

The deckhand and the pilot came at him in the wave's psychic wake, witchblades spitting darkness as the Lion Sword swept out to give them battle.

Twenty demigods of genic alchemy the Emperor had wrought, but the Lion had been the first, the template and the paragon upon which all of his brothers were mere copies. The khrave-hosts moved at near-impossible speeds. Witchblades hissed as they reacted to every movement of the *Lion Sword* that rippled back from the relic blade's future. Their joints cracked, bones breaking, smoke rising from their muscles as they strove to match the grace, speed and fury of a primarch at war.

They were hopelessly outclassed.

The Lion parried a jab to the groin and turned it, rolled around the darting flick of the second, and then coolly hackhanded the *Lion Sword* through the pilot's shoulders. The power sword chopped the woman’s torso in half. The sudden death-trauma expelled the khrave consciousness with a psychic scream that bowled the deckhand onto his back. The Lion was above him before the back of his head hit the deck. He twirled the *Lion Sword* until it was overhead, point down, and then drove it through the second khrave-host's heart.

'Sire!' yelled Trigaine.

The *Harpy's* battered nose section came bumping and sparking back across the deck on a straight shot for the Lion. He dropped to the ground. The gunship remnant burned overhead, disintegrating finally in an explosion of fiery motes that swiftly took over a third of the bay The Lion turned back to Savine. She was gone.

‘Now who is the better hunter?'

The Lion looked up.

The khrave-host hovered a metre above him.

She dropped with a laugh, sinking her claws into his scalp.

II

The docking bay disappeared. It was still there, after a fashion, a reflection

glimpsed through smoke, vanishing with every shift of the wind. The fire guttered to embers, the shadows stretching up like tall trees, like bars. The hard bangs of Trigaine's bolter were an echo through the vastness of a forest at dawn.

'This is Caliban,' said the Lion.

'This is your mind,' said Savine. She looked around, feigning the interest of the remembrancer whose skin she wore. In this place of the mind her appearance was almost human, dark veins withdrawn, pupils shrunken, only a faint luminosity of skin that was in tune with the unreality of her surrounds. 'What a drab and flavourless place it is too. A mind like this has no right to exist. You, your brothers, your sons - you sicken me.'

The Lion struck with his sword only to find his hand empty. Fingers unfurled from their grip as Savine laughed.

'All your prowess, all your gene-wrought strength, it is worth nothing here. In here, I am g-'

The words became an airless choke as the Lion lifted her by the throat. Her eyes bulged, her feet kicking futilely as she scratched at his forearms, the leaves of the shadow-forest rustling and wavering as she did so, but no relief or rescue broke through the reality that the primarch had constructed.

The Lion was the master of all his domains.

'You have dived willingly into a primarch's mind, and for that hubris alone you deserve this failure.'

He squeezed tighter. The hands about her throat were metaphorical, the assault mental, the psychological equivalent of covering a candle with a jar, only this flame fed off the energies of the ether rather than air.

The shadows ran from the walls like wet paint. Stars ignited in the firmament of the imagination and wheeled, spinning around a supermassive black hole that gave a once-in-a-million-year pulse of light and matter with every hike of the woman's throat.

Through a web of psychic connectivity he felt the squirming of lights that were not stare. A nebula. By the Lion's will, the perspective shifted, drawing closer to the cloud, the individual specks of dust resolving themselves as ships. The baroque, castellated lengths of Imperial warships slid through the void alongside the bloated scrap-plated bulk of ork kroozers and the infinitely varied craft of void-fairing xenos scattered amongst them. Most were incalculably ancient, belonging to races never

encountered by humankind beyond a scrap of writing on a tablet or some unidentified debris in orbit around a broken world. Some were elegant, all crystal spindles and delicate pods, like palaces set adrift in the void. Others ploughed through the cold of space like true ships of war, their purpose relatable even if the mind behind them had not been. Their vessels were spined and barbed, hooked and armoured like void Crustacea, glittering with force shields and encrusted with weaponry. Within every one the foul souls of the khrave glowered. But the light there was dim. The Lion went further, the psychic trail leading him to the slender black ships, vividly haloed with alien power, that moved through the silent void like spiders stalking their nomadic prey.

The web of control widened further still.

The Lion followed it.

The mass of shipping became an asteroid field, then a debris cloud, a ring of orbital wreckage around a dead and broken world that itself turned slowly around a faded giant.

'Your home world in the Northern Fringe,' said the Lion.

Savine said nothing. Closed off from the warp by the walls of the lion's mind, she could not speak, but her spirit was bidden to respond.

+Yes.+

The Lion drank in every detail, memorising every star cluster and visual anomaly. Even as he did so he felt the pull of a more massive mind, the star waned, shedding its photosphere into space. The world that listed around it crumbled, rock and plasma dragged inexorably into the yawning iris of the galaxy's core, the Milky Way's flame-wreathed eye holding Lion El'Jonson transfixed as he hung above the event horizon of oblivion.

+The khrave autochthonar+ Savine's struggles were lessening, but even under the reality-ending ferocity of that infernal gaze she was helpless to resist the Lion's probing. +The First. The Ender of Worlds.+

III

The air was thick with smoke, tainted with the harsh odours of burnt metal and solder. A hundred fires of various sizes and severity burned over the familiar, if grievously mauled, topography of the docking bay. The Lion shifted position, his body telling him he had been immobile for longer than

his recollection of events could account for, and Savine's body slid limply from his shoulder.

She landed with the grace of a corpse.

Trigaine approached. The weight of his powered harness shook the debris-strewn decking. He looked down at Savine. 1 le looked up at his primarch.

The Lion gave a nod.

'She is dead.'

He turned to look away. Insofar as Trigaine would have been able to comprehend he was staring at nothing. But in his own mind the Lion recalled and deciphered the psychic imprint of a stellar duster, half a dozen augur-dark and unpromising systems located several thousand light years ahead of the Great Crusade to the galactic north. He remembered the lights of the xenos war-fleet as they had appeared to Savine, as numerous as specks of dust in an asteroid cloud - and converging inexorably on Muspel.

'Now, my son, to inflict the same on her species.'

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NINE

I

The urgent chime of a priority summons woke Aravain.

He had no means of knowing exactly how long it had been blinking. His armour's chrono was broken and none of the terminals in his section were lit. He picked his ruined helmet up off the deck, studying the gouges left in the ceramite by the psychic imprint of xenos claws The summons blinked from the crumpled darkness within. He should have been as dead as his battleplate's systems. Even from afar, the Lion held the power to intervene on his sons' behalf. The khrave recognised the Primarch as a threat. His timely return to the *Invincible Reason* had made Savine-khrave careless in her execution.

He should have been dead.

The thought was humbling.

The alert in his helmet kept blinking. Such was the damage that had been done to it he was physically incapable of reaching inside and deactivating it. Aravain tucked the misshapen helmet under his arm and limped in the direction of the command deck.

There was no such thing as a direct route. The internal layout of the *Invincible Reason* was a puzzle designed to baffle any who had not earned the privilege of being there. A journey to the command deck from the enginarium sub-decks would take a mortal serf the better part of a day. Aravain could do it in under an hour, but only under ideal conditions. The condition of the *Invincible Reason* was a long way from ideal. Error runes glared from the fascia terminals of every mag-lift he approached. The grav-rails were functioning, but intermittently. Carriages loaded with troops and munitions flashed by the platforms, their systems failing to respond to Aravain's legion-priority overrides.

It took him almost three hours, leaking a trail of partially coagulated blood and liquid ceramite sealant jelly over a tri dimensional fourteen-kilometre zigzag of the ship, before finally limping his way through the command deck's outer barbican.

The great doors had been forced open, held ajar by transhuman muscle while human technicians crawled over the narrow space, bracing it with steel frames, attacking its exposed innards with arc torches and drills.

Every section of the Invincible Reason showed evidence of vandalism and sabotage, but the command deck had taken the brunt of the khrave's psychic uprising.

Every console beyond those of the primary dais, the Lion's dark throne still bathed in screen light, had been smashed. Doctrinal wafers had been torn from cogitators and smashed underfoot. Delicate instrumentarium had been prised open, reams of magnetic tape and wiring unspooled. Fire-retardant foams clung to bulkheads and hooded statuary like the acid spit of a predatory wildflower. While cracks haloed the crystalflex window plating, the auto-rounds that had been unloaded into them from within still stuck in the glass. More human crewmen worked feverishly through the wreckage, performing delicate surgery alongside knights of the Ironwing and their mortal apprentices, splicing portable units into the command systems, bypassing brutalised interfaces, even as the entire deck groaned like a deep-sea submersible at its depth limit Sensorium chiefs argued with master gunners. Tech-priests remonstrated with Legion forge-wrights. Impacts dazzled across the forward void shield arrays, spectacular aurorae of bleeding colours filtering around the fracture patterns of the prow windows.

Aravain flinched as sparks erupted from a gutted conduit. Another shudder

of pain torsioned through the spine of the ship as he limped across a protesting gantry and up a flight of aluminium steps towards the dais.

The Lion was seated in the high-backed throne; elbows on the plaited-wood rests, chin resting on the backs of steepled fingers. The shrouded figures of the Knights of Santales ringed their silent lord. They faced forwards. Before them, veiled by the distortions of an inconstancy of lithocast, stood a dozen robed and hooded knights. It was almost possible to gauge the warriors' relative distances by the stability and clarity of their projected image.

To the left of the throne, in a cone of phosphorescence beamed down from the overhead projection plate. Firebringer Griffayn appeared as real as if he physically stood at the primarch's right hand. His battleship, the *Forest Sepulchre*, was the second largest in the 2003rd Expedition Fleet, and remained close to the flagship, so as to more efficiently screen the fleet's capital assets behind lighter warships and escorts. Master of the Ravenwing, Garradin, aboard the Oaken Throne, and master of the Storm-wing, Brigaint, on the Sir Amadis were fuzzed and haloed, but with a core of solidity that rendered them readily identifiable. Duriel of the Ironwing, judging by the rain splashing off his image's armour, was still upon the walls of the Vaniskray. Relative proximity made his image clear, but the portable nature of his transmission gear made the signal erratic, his hololithic avatar periodically spreading and compressing, winking out altogether before re-establishing itself a moment later with a burr of stressed machinery. The other members of the conclave were evidently even more remote, distance-lagged outlines of projection static and audio feedback.

The only member of the Council of Masters to be physically present was Holguin. The lord of the Deathwing was garbed for war, encased in glossy black plate with ivory trim, Martian red gold worked hard into the finish A crimson cloak lay over one shoulder, leaving free the ornate leather-wrapped grip of a Terranic greatsword that was almost as huge as the Lion's own blade. His beast-mawed helmet was gripped underarm, draped in turn by the hanging cloak. He nodded without speaking as Aravain ascended the dais, the rings in his tri-forked beard glittering under a dozen dim sources of light.

Of the Dreadwing there was no obvious representation.

Aravain thought of Redloss, alone in the Santales armourium, and fell certain that the Dreadbringer was attending to his duties in his own way.

'You are late, brother,' said the anonymous warrior to Aravain's left as he assumed his place within the inner circle of Santales Knights.

'It could not be helped.'

'What happened to your helmet?'

Aravain grunted 'What have I missed?'

Approximately four and a half hours ago a war-fleet of undetermined size and configuration entered Muspel's orbit. Our Santales brethren across the fleet helped to quell the uprisings amongst the mortal crew, but we're in no condition to engage this new enemy in battle. Thanks to our preparations, Brother Duriel holds the Vaniskray, but the enemy has been landing troops by the thousand and most of the city and the first two islets of the Sheitansvar chain are now theirs.'

'Khrave?'

'Not yet. So far they have only committed their thrall soldiers, but so long as we hold the Vaniskray it can only be a matter of time before they decide to show themselves.'

'*We need to hit them before they can finish deploying ground forces*,' said Brigaint.

'Our sensors con barely see what we would have them fire upon,' said Garradin with a snarl of such intensity that it shattered his likeness into pixels before it could be hastily reformed.

The Ravenbringer was a gravel-haired campaigner who had served the role under a different title for Grand Master Hector Thrane. fifty years before the First legion had stepped a little from the shadows to become the Dark Angels. To those under his Wing he was a hero of Unification, adored as much for his immense experience as for his trove of stories. To the majority of others, Aravain included, he was a relic of an unrecorded time.

'*The sensors con see them perfectly well,*' said Griffayn. '*It is the crewmen operating them that seem blind.*'

'Why are the warriors of the legion not affected by this...' Holguin pondered his choice of words, looking to his brother-knights for aid.

'*Psychosis*,' Duriel suggested.

'As good a term as any,' said Holguin.

Aravain dared a glance at the Lion.

The primarch sat in a repose of such preternatural deliberation that he appeared as something carved from spruce or alder, an arbiter of the hidden world, there to be called upon in times of strife, infinite in patience, just in prosecution.

'It is not because the khrave would not desire to corrupt us,' Aravain said. 'But they exploit division and weakness and I find only brotherhood and courage in the soul of the First. My lord Griffayn of the Firewing is correct in his assessment. They do not fool our instalments as the weapons of the rangda were able to, but the minds of those who read them. The ships are there to be seen, brothers, but misinterpreted, erroneously disregarded as augur echoes or debris, or simply unseen.'

'Well said, brother,' said Holguin, just as Stenius walked up the steps to the dais.

The Terran looked angered. An evil-looking burn, black and undressed, peeled from die side of his face. The las-burn had taken half of the warrior's face, including part of a lip and the entirely of an eyebrow, one nostril melted shut He could count himself fortunate that the shot had not claimed the eye as well. With the stormy expression of one who would, in future, snap the neck of such good fortune under his boot, he presented a data-slate to his primarch's eyeline.

The Lion barely looked at it. A flick of the eye was enough for him to parse the entirety of its contents.

"Direct your attentions to position grid 244-398-772.'

The primarch nodded a dismissal and Stenius withdrew, back down the steps to the primary deck level, where he snarled instructions at the gunnery officers. Runes lit up along the serried banks of gunnery consoles, indicating the armament status of the *Invincible Reason*'s many hundreds of macro-ordnance batteries. Reports were passed between stations, updates received via hardline from remote battery chiefs located in situ, Stenius monitoring every step like a neophyte master in search of failure, launch klaxons sounded and the deck shook, bracing rods shivering and flexing, as a partial broadside was fired off into space.

They waited.

'*What*?' said Duriel. '*What is happening?*'

"*An explosion*,' said Garradin. '*I see explosions on my screens.*'

'*Confirmed*,' said Brigaint. '*Ship death, twelve thousand metres off my*

starboard bow.'

'*I see it too*,' added Griffayn. '*But my auspex still returns nothing*.'

The cenobium knight with whom Aravain had previously spoken drew back his hood. The warrior was the mortal equivalent of a geological feature, closely cropped grey hair the colour of worn slate and a face that had been carved into an irreverent mien with pale scar tissue and black melanchrome spots. Aravain fought back his surprise as the knight dipped his forehead in mutual recognition before hardening his expression once more and stepping out from the circle of equals.

'The insurgency that the khrave attempted to instigate aboard our ships was crushed,' he said. 'In light of that failure, they attempt a subtler mode of subversion. The human brain is a complicated organ, easily tricked. Every moment we spend conscious is a moment in which we are being deceived in some small but fundamental way by the nature of our own minds. How simple is it then for a species like the khrave to coerce an undisciplined mind into accepting a whole new set of lies? It is unlikely that our affected crewmen are even aware of the influence they are under.'

'Trigaine?' Aravain whispered, no longer able to keep his surprise entirely in check.

The old knight drew a Santales talisman from the collar of his surplice.

It was gold.

'*You* are preceptor of the Order of Santales?'

'Did you think it was coincidence that assigned you to Kaye's command for the *Obrin* mission?'

'I thought it was on the orders of Firebringer Griffayn.'

'It was. But why do you think he attached you to my squad?'

'I...'

The tangled hierarchies of the First Legion had always been a web of intrigue and inference, but, unlike the structures of the XX or the X who could lay their own claims to operational complexity, every strand of control within the First had been designed to answer to the will of the centre.

Trigaine gestured to the seated primarch.

As Grandmaster of the Six Wings and lord of the Preceptors' Council, I knew the nemesis that we might face here. The clad-ograms drawn up by Duriel and the linguists of his order have long pointed to the existence of a

human empire that once spanned the borders of the Ghoul Stars. Through the efforts of others, the Santales included, there were those of us who knew, or at least suspected, what befell them.'

'You could have told me that l worked at the same mystery as my brothers,' said Duriel.

The Lion raised an eyebrow. He spoke no words in justification, for he needed none and Duriel bowed his head in acquiescence.

Aravain nodded. His lord's refusal to answer was an answer in itself, and truer in what it said than that which the Ironbringer sought. The sheer calculation required to manually bend a legion to one being's command was mind-breaking: several hundred ships, a hundred and fifty thousand warriors, tens of millions of ancillaries, auxiliaries and mortal support staff, all of them scattered across scores of distant warzones.

'*This was why you ignored the call to Ullanor in favour of the Northern Fringe*,' said Duriel.

To draw out the parasite that has preyed on the outposts of mankind since the Golden Age of Expansion and crush them,' said Aravain. This will be a triumph to rival the destruction of Ulrakk Urg. It will be a victory that is ours alone and will remind our brother Legions that the Dark Angels will always be the First. That we can again be the force we were before Rangda.'

'*The Legion has not the strength to fulfill the duties of every mortal officer on our ships*,' said Garradin. '*Even had we not committed eleven full companies to Maripose*.'

'*Not if we want them to actually fight*,' Brigaint agreed.

'*The khrave control what we see. They hear the orders we give as we give them.*' Griffayn's near-solid image broke apart, reforming with crossed arms and bowed head. '*No Legion could fight with those odds against them. Not even ours. The Firewing recommends we withdraw*.'

Several shadowed and insubstantially rendered faces scowled

'*The Ravenwing concurs*,' said Garradin, with a sigh. '*Incoming fire is increasing. Point batteries and evasive manoeuvres will serve us only so long before the main strength of the khrave's armada arrives*.'

All those present turned towards the Lion, seeking guidance, or arbitration, but as was so often the case when entreating the primarch, coming away with empty hands.

Holguin gripped the podium rail in his gauntlet, the squeal of metal under

forced compression startling the crew working in the recessed cogitation pits on the other side.

'They *must* have a weakness.'

'They do,' said Aravain, surprising himself with his interruption, and looked up. Trigaine nodded for him to continue. 'Their hosts,' he said. 'Their power is drawn from their hosts. Destroy their hosts and it will be the same as targeting the plasma furnaces of a warship.'

'*You speak convenient half-truths, brother, worthy of any Chaplain*.' Griffayn's profile fluctuated as he leant into the projection field. '*You say "hosts" but what you mean is the population of Muspel*.'

Aravain nodded.

'*This is not Rangda*,' said Duriel. '*Nor is it Ullanor Prime, and I know how impatient some amongst my brothers are to be done with this world that we might rejoin our cousins there. But we cannot exterminate a compliant populace*.'

'This population is hardly compliant.' said Aravain.

'*I would counter that I am in a better position to see that than you, brother, and I am still less quick to grasp upon the solution of genocide.*'

'There is no way to distinguish the parasitised from those who might be saved.'

'*This is what the Firewing exists to do*,' said Griffayn. '*This is why you were admitted into our circle, Codicier. Give my Chaplains and enigmatus cabals a week, Sire, and I will have the solution you require*.'

'We don't have a week,' said Brigaint.

'*I will be the judge of that*,' said Duriel. '*I can and will hold this wall for as long as it is asked of me*.'

The Lion stirred in his throne and all about him fell silent.

'The First Legion fights out of duty, not for the accolades we expect to receive. Loyalty. Honour. These are virtues best measured by a warrior's brothers, and not to be judged second-hand by those who never held a blade by their side. Centuries from now, the actions of the First will be unpicked by scholars and I do not doubt that we will be judged harshly. They will never know of our valour, of the sacrifices we made for my father's ideal. They cannot. They would not thank us for the blood we spilled upon our hands in their name. But in our hearts, in the remembrances of our own, we will know the truth - we did our duty. That is all the justification we seek

and it is sufficient. We are as the Emperor made us - weapons, created for this bloody time, and as weapons we can ask nothing more of Him than that.'

He turned to Trigaine.

'There are weapons still in the Santales armourium that I will not sanction for use aboard my own ship. By my order they have been released to Redloss' command and are on their way to the planet with the full strength of the Dreadwing. The Knights of Santales will join them on the surface,' the Lion went on. 'When the khrave attack in force. Duriel will have need of your insights and your weaponry.'

Trigaine dropped to one knee and bowed his head.

'For the Lion, and for Caliban.'

Like a ripple through a still pond, beneath a moon in an auspicious phase, the Knights of Santales took the knee and swore their unbreakable vows. Their oaths went unrecorded, but would be enforced unto death by all here present.

'*What orders do you have for us, Sire?*' asked one from amidst the formless lithocast wraiths whose physical locations were furthest distant from the *Invincible Reason*, his voice a rasp like wire pushing through wool.

The Lion spoke then his commands, but his words were not meant for Aravain and his brothers.

The Knights of Santales were already marching from the dais. To do their duty.

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TEN

I

The sun fell first.

Claws of shadow stretched out from the snow-capped knuckles of the Namastor Peaks, slicing across the shrieking chaos of Maripose as far as its fortress peninsula. Duriel could not help but wonder if there was some symbolism at play, or at least a deliberate attempt at psychological warfare as only the deeply psychic xenos mind could comprehend it, hearkening as it did to primeval terrors that only emerged from the forests at night.

The city of Maripose had fallen next.

Then Coccyges.

Then Lament.

Wrath-pattern starfighters, Xiphons and Primaris-Lightnings tumbled from high altitude flight and into the skies of Muspel like flies drawn to a carcass. Their hulls bore the paint schemes and insignia of a hundred different Aeronautica divisions, from battle-groups assigned to dozens of warzones across the Northern fringe. Huge-bellied army conveyors and Mechanicum ark landers sank into the upper atmosphere like tectonic plates

being lowered into place from orbit. The cumulative ferocity of ten thousand desist thrusters, mass stabilisers and plasma drivers struck the sky with the sickly plumes of a stricken atmosphere. Muspel's blanket cover of thick black clouds had already scorched from the hemisphere, and these were simply the opening phases of the battle that would follow.

Then Merigion.

Then Nigris.

Only Uncus, the wave-lashed rock upon which the Vaniskray was perched, still stood in the Legion's hands.

Hydra, Hyperion and Praetor batteries stabbed skywards, re-igniting the night with a pulsing light-shower of contrails, tracers and pounding skybursts. They fired at will. No Legion aircraft contested the skies. Duriel had judged the enemy too numerous to be battled head-on, and the dedicated landing facilities of lament too difficult to hold against such a host. As it had proven. Duriel had sacrificed as much strength as he could spare to delay the thrall-host's advance, but he had known that the duty the Lion had given him would ultimately be executed here.

The Vaniskray was besieged.

Massed columns of tanks and mechanised infantry rolled across the Nigris Bridge. Stormswords and Stormhammers with reinforced ceramite bolted onto their glacis plates led the advance a rolling wall of super-heavy armour and bristling mega-batteries shepherding the battalion-strength force of mixed armour and transports. Ionian Russ tanks maintained a constant and heavy rate of fire as they advanced, a thunder that rolled across the strait. The massive fortification of the Nigris bridge-fort took its punishment stoically, barely even trembling under the onslaught.

But the Stormswords were not yet in range.

The guns of two thousand Tactical and Tactical Support legionaries hammered the leading edge of the avalanche with fire. Cataphractii Terminators equipped with plasma blasters and Reaper autocannon added their fire. Servitor-operated artillery’ casemates, hermetic structures enclosing quad-linked lascannons, Earthshaker cannons and volkite carronades, stabbed the bridge with fiercely powered beams and massive shells. Bullets and energy beams alike pranged from the thick frontal armour of the super-heavies. Conversion beamers, ranged by Duriel's own hand to the point of minimum instability and maximum power, carved the

biggest tanks like plas-tek models. Induced subatomic implosions collapsed the wheezing wrecks onto their tracks. The gutted hulls of lighter main line tanks, Valdors and Leman Russ, died in droves. It was not enough. The weight and momentum of oncoming vehicles shunted the wrecks unceremoniously aside.

'Brace!' Duriel roared, voice augmitted to maximum volume, as the forward wedge of Stormswords finally rolled into range.

A fully armoured Space Marine could fear little on the battlefield. The standard-issue small-arms borne by most of the galaxy’s races, mankind included, pattered off Mark IV power armour like gravel, while shrapnel that would have flayed a squad of baseline troopers was as deadly to the transhuman warrior as vapour. But when the battery of Stormsword super-heavy siege cannons unleashed their fury upon the walls, even the legionaries dropped behind the battlements and braced. Only the Dreadnoughts and Terminators remained defiant, and only then because there was nowhere large enough for the gigantic warriors to take cover.

Muspel shook to the roar of an apocalypse. The walls were pulverised, great gouges torn out of them. Artillery' towers were toppled. Ramparts were obliterated, the knights sheltering behind them atomised. Huge, vertical cracks appeared through the walls. The fortification groaned like a hero run through with a blade, wounded mortally but determined to stand, to take one last blow for the Imperium of Man before succumbing.

Duriel drew his axe. Beside him, one of the consuls assigned to him by the Lion, a vigilator by the name of Anariel, did the same with his Calibanite sword.

'For the Lion!' he yelled, as with a thunderous growl of engine power one of the Stormhammers pulled ahead of the rest.

It was fitted with a dozer blade wider than the tank was long, heavy weapons fire pinging off it as the vehicle accelerated towards the bridge-fort's gates. Behind it, human and augmented-human storm troopers poured out of Dracosan and Triaros carriers even as the vehicles slewed to a stop, assembling lightweight siege towers and scaling ladders on the run. Space Marines rose from cover to mow them down with bolter fire. Conversion beam towers and artillery placements continued to stab at the lighter vehicles in their range. Troop transports and support tanks disappeared in geysers of plasteel and ceramite. The mortal soldiers charged through it.

They had lost none of their combat discipline to their khrave domination, even as they had shed all of their fear of death. The first squads made the wall.

'Prepare for escalade!' Duriel bellowed. 'Stand to repel!'

Along the length of the wall Tactical Support legionaries drew their combat blades. Their Tactical brothers blasted straight down with bolters on full-auto. Stationed along the battlements at intervals, twenty Leviathan-pattern Siege Dreadnoughts powered up their arrays of near-range battlefield arcana whose lethality an entire squad of Cataphractii could only imagine, shrouding themselves in atomantic shielding. The Leviathan was a spectacularly rare pattern of Dreadnought, and no Legion but the First had the resources or the means to commit so many to a single action. Even they did not do so lightly.

The Stormhammer smashed into the gate.

The structure withstood the impact for about a second before exploding inwards, followed by the screeching mass of the super-heavy tank. Rolling over caltrops, tank spikes and gutting lasers, it crashed through the inner gate, slewing onto the esplanade and into the fire of Duriel's own main-line tanks, assault troops and infantry reserves. It was dead before it had stopped moving, bin it had fulfilled its task. With the uncanny precision that so characterised the actions of the khrave, hundreds of scaling ladders hit the wall at the same moment that the Stormhammer breached the outer gate.

Secutarii wielding arc lances and mag-shields and encased in hard-fitting augmented carapace flooded Duriel's section. A blow of his axe clove a mag-inverter shield in twain. Duriel kicked the reeling warrior from the wall. His servo-armature unfolded, scorpion-like, to punch another into the back of a merlon, breaking both. All around him, warriors fought as knights of the First, obliterating the thrall-skitarii with point-blank bursts of bolter fire or outfighting the cyborgised assault troops man to man, meeting them combat blade to arc lance and besting them. A machine-amplified bellow rang out from the left as Ancient Domniain swept a dozen veletarii storm troopers from the rampart with a blow of his siege claw. The Leviathan turned ponderously, incinerating an entire wave of the assault with gouts of chemical fire from his phosphex discharger.

'We could use some of the mortal auxilia to man the point guns," Anariel shouted.

'We cannot trust them,' Duriel returned. 'I will call on them only when things can get no worse.'

A burst of bolter fire sounded off to the right. A knight of the 27th Company screamed a warning at the same moment he was hurled bodily from the battlements. The knight held his trigger down, bracketing what appeared to be a bruise in the materium with explosive shells, before breaking against the flagstones below. The deformity manifesting above the wall continued to discolour, extruding as it did so the most hideous abomination of the basic anthropoid plan that Duriel could have imagined. Two arms, two legs, the shadow of something monstrous, a nightmare reflected in liquified obsidian. It was a slit in the real.

The knights on the wall turned their fire onto it. Seven different guns left distortion haloes around the impermeable circumference of a psy-shield as the xenos creature turned its eyeless face to look' down the length of the rampart. With a single thought it bettered Ancient Domniain's destructive endeavours, blasting a hole through the legion's gunnery line that thrall troopers surged to fill.

A knight garlanded in a sergeant's laurels bellowed a challenge and charged, chainsword revving. The xenos did not even turn to face him, plucking him from the parapet with an invisible hand and throwing him screaming into the sea.

'The khrave,' Duriel whispered. 'The khrave have come at last.'

He whirled in horror as fresh insurgencies of violence ripped into the very heart of the Legion's defences, even from as far back as the Vaniskray's great keep where the gonfalons of battalions, companies and individual champions fluttered in the tortured thermals. Everywhere, monstrous black xenoforms appeared as if from air. Teleportation, while poorly understood, was widely utilised. Even the orks were capable of a primitive exploitation of the principle. But Duriel had never before heard of it being employed with such exquisite precision. It spoke to a mastery of the warp that was breathtaking.

A warrior khrave stalked towards him as if it were a serpent of smoke. It had form, but not one Duriel could fix upon in his mind All he could take from it were impressions: cruel joints, sharpened bone structure, black skin that was at once paper-dry and shiny It smelled of rust. Its movements came with a crackle and snap reminiscent of beetles being ground under an

alchemist's pestle.

Duriel's servo-arm whirred, plates Hipping back to arm plasma-repeaters, flamers, arc claws, anything that could conceivably hinder such a beast. Sizzling streamers of plasma scorched across the warrior khrave's psy-shield, enveloping it in the swollen coronae of aborted suns At the same time, Anariel hacked it with Calibanite steel. The xenos appeared to deflect the blow even after it had been delivered, rewriting the preceding second and a half to turn ii aside on its arm. Duriel looked on in shock as the khrave made a dismissive gesture, crushing the vigilator in his armour.

'For Caliban!' Duriel yelled, dousing the khrave form and his mortally wounded consul in flame as he charged. And then he swung, servo-assist motors in backplate, plackart and gardbrace adding their cries to his as he pushed them for every last iota of strength.

From time immemorial, throughout the long terrors of Old Night, and from civilisation's dawn in the long-forgotten ages that had preceded it, fire and blade had been the chosen weapons of knights, of those whose duty it had been to stand against the darkness.

The khrave swerved, not just agile but pre-emptively swift, joints popping as it bent under Duriel's axe-blow. It lashed out a shadow-clawed fool. Duriel punched it aside on his servo-arm and hewed his power axe into the khrave's thoracic skeleton. The xenos emitted a shriek that bypassed the ears and the sense cells of the skin, reverberating outwards from the primitive ganglia of his brain stem into the more sophisticated cortices that pressed around it. With a grand unfurling, the injured khrave threw him back, a wrecking ball of psychokinelic power that pushed him hard up against the ramparts. A hundred systems blinked in protest.

Grimacing in pain, he looked up, over the embattled ranks of his reserve units in the esplanade. He watched for only a moment, barely able to mist his own transhuman senses as a teleportation rift many-fold larger than any he had yet seen split the far end of the road in half. Reality inverted itself with an implosive crump. Inside became out. lire microscopic rolled outwards into massivity. The unstable rift collapsed back upon itself, folding into the warp with a loathsomely organic pop as the inhuman war machine took its first nautiloid step onto the Vaniskray.

Thought failed him.

The Titan's aspect was tantalisingly reflective. Its size varied constantly,

ranging between that of an Emperor-class Battle Titan and an Imperial Knight whilst simultaneously occupying exactly the same amount of road. Its dimensions, apparently, were whatever it deigned to adopt at any given moment. Weapons fire disappeared into its shape. Numerous arms undulated from its core body. It mounted no obvious weapons systems, but Dark Angels fell before it as if struck. Their lungs stopped working. Their hearts stopped beating. Brains engineered to feel no fear short-circuited under psychic pressure. Predator turrets rotated and Malcadors turned grindingly to address this new threat from the rear, as the Vaniskray's colossal servitor guns simultaneously opened fire. The onslaught bounced harmlessly off the Titan's uncertain shape, psychic trauma throbbing from its shields like a concussive wake, and two kilometres ahead of its insertion point Duriel felt his brain stammer.

A psychic Titan.

He could never have conceived of seeing something so monstrous.

The khrave immediately on top of him pushed down with the full might of its mind and Duriel screamed. In defiance of all probability and precedent, the strength of the First Legion began to break.

II

'The khrave are committed,' said Aravain, eyes half closed, his mortal senses cocooned by the restive howl of the Storm Eagle's engines. *Dark Steed* coasted at an altitude of four hundred kilometres, well above the operational envelope of the khrave's interceptor swarms.

'Are you certain?' said Trigaine. 'There has been no confirmation from the planet.'

In addition to the preceptor and Aravain, nineteen Santales Knights of the inner circle swayed in their drop harnesses, armoured, armed and adorned in the heraldries and paraphernalia of the First. There were none of the jokes, rivalry and personal challenges that debased such brotherhoods of other Legions. Here, each knight hung in his creaking restraint throne, each a man unto his own, meditating on his own duty in the battle to come. While the preceptor's head was hooded again as custom demanded, his armour had been decorated with the oath papers of his warriors, affixed with moss-green wax and inscribed with golden inks.

Hanging from his own cable restraints, Aravain turned his head towards him. His replacement helmet concealed bloodshot eyes and masked from his brothers the taste of acid bile on his longue. I le did not know if their minds could feel the psychic weight of the true-khrave as he could, but Trigaine's words led him to doubt it.

'Trust me, preceptor. I am sure.'

A montent later, Trigaine's helmet-vox burred. The garbled battle cries of their brothers filtered through the cabin from the preceptor's unsecured vox.

The old warrior looked grim.

'I will not question your intuition again, brother.'

'I sense it will be called upon before we are triumphant here.'

The preceptor opened a new vox-link Trigaine to all units. 'Prepare to descend.'

III

'Adjust bearing - 218-112-225. Maintain nominal thrust.'

The Lion passed the encrypted data-slate to the helmswoman. She was a slight woman, fair-haired, her dark green uniform ringed with sweat patches, speckled with bloody crimson over one sleeve. She threw a weary salute before hurrying back to her post, shepherded every step of the way by a fully armoured legionary, the green glow of darkvision and targeting screed rinsing his lenses of any modicum of empathy.

By the lion's decree the deck was in darkness, ihe warp shutters had been closed over the viewing panes, scaling the deck in adamantium and denying even the light of the stars. All but a handful of vital terminals had been shut down. Puddles of watery green illumination emanated from workstations in which the same mortal officers had been penned for hours.

By the Lion's second decree, all crew deemed non-essential had been locked into their quarters or, if that had proven impractical, rounded up into mess halls, storage bays, auditoria and any other space large enough to hold a few thousand baseline humans for an as yet unspecified length of time. Vox had been deactivated, except on the Lion's own voice command. Every internal door that could be remotely sealed had been, legionaries of the Firewing prowled every corridor, armed with pulse-stun weaponry and orders to subdue on sight anyone who was not Lion El'Jonson.

That the primarch worked to some stratagem he would not share was lost on no one. The Legion was intolerant of curiosity, but suspicion was healthy, and quietly encouraged at all levels.

The Lion had ordered over a hundred minor course corrections since authorising their initial escape vector, the *Invincible Reason* sailing in circles for the better part of three hours.

The reasons for this the primarch divulged to no one. The facts of this he deliberately withheld from the five auspectoriae plinths who, oblivious to one another, carried out their work in parallel.

Stenius approached the dais bearing a stack of slates. He handed them face down to the Lion and then snapped to attention without a word. The Lion turned them over and unsealed them, taking a second to absorb them fully.

'Aegis,' the Lion said, his words seeking out every darkened corner without need for a raised voice, and another mortal officer and his transhuman shadow began the long walk to the primarch’s dais. The primarch turned to Stenius. 'Is all prepared?'

'Yes, lord. Though my knowledge of the Theologitek's secrets is but a fraction of Master Duriel's.'

'The Ironbringer's duties demand his presence elsewhere. I expect you will rise to this challenge.'

Stenius pursed his lips, and nodded. The warriors of the old Terran Legion were reticent, as much as, and in some cases even more than, their Calibanite brothers. It suggested something in their genetic makeup, rather than their planetary heritage, that made them thus. That this had always been the Emperor's design.

'Yes, Sire.'

’Report to launch bay five,' said the Lion. 'You will know what to do when you get there.'

The Terran nodded, then turned on his heel and marched down the gangway without another word.

The aegis officer arrived just as Stenius left.

'Unlock doors epsilon-1235798, gamma-7432191, and tau-001252 through to -59,' the Lion said.

The officer saluted and withdrew, the Lion satisfied that no mind beyond his own could hope to memorise every one of a Gloriana's several thousand portal idents. As far as the officer, or any xenos sentience with access to the

mortal's thoughts could know, the Lion was opening and closing doors at random.

'Lion to Holguin,' he said, activating his personal short-range vox.

'Holguin, in position.'

'The Companions are assembled?'

'Yes, Sire.'

'Have them muster in the starboard teleportarium.'

'Yes, Sire.'

The Lion pushed his hands down into the arms of his throne and rose.

'I will be joining you presently.'

* * *

IV

Most knights keenly anticipated combat drops.

The adrenaline. The noise. The bone-shaking force of a terminal-velocity descent coupled with the ferocious Gs of evasive manoeuvres. It was as close a feeling to pure terror as a warrior engineered to be without fear could know. Others secretly loathed them for, Aravain suspected, the same reasons: the feelings of mortal helplessness they evoked. Aravain had no love for the experience, but he, and he alone amongst his brethren, was far from helpless.

With eyes glazed, he extended his mind's senses through *Dark Steed's* armour and into the screaming, cinder-lit atmosphere of Muspel.

It was like plunging head first into an electrical storm, but this was a hurricane not of fire and metal, but of the strands of fate. A missile looped towards him, sending forth ripples from its point of predestination. Aravain bent his mind towards it, as if to pluck a leaf from the wind. The Storm Eagle banked hard, slamming Aravain's semi-conscious body sideways in its harness. The future fled his grasp. The missile whistled across the gunship's bow and detonated in a clump of freefalling debris.

Aravain grunted. Blood trickled from his nose. He dabbed it with one finger and looked down at the red spots on the black metal. No scrying of the future was without flaw. It was contingent by its nature, and in a system as disordered as an aerial battle any one of a billion flecks of dust could

shatter a man's preconceptions and fling him down a doomed path. Aravain concentrated. His perceptions were blunted somehow. The future seemed far away.

This was the khrave's work.

He looked down at the pistol in his lap. The glow of the charge cells was a black spot over his mind.

He closed his eyes and focused, his mind's eye seeing the rattling slubber fire that winged one of their escorts, a massively over-armed Fire Raptor gunship that resembled a mastiff with stub-metal wings.

He made to vox a warning, but it was the near-past he was seeing now, not the future, He watched, a spectator, as the bullet hose chewed through paint and armour. The rugged gunship wobbled but held steady as the Fury interceptor overshot. Aravain exulted as the Fire Raptor shredded the aircraft's engine nacelles with a thunderous shriek of Avenger boltcannon fire.

Unable to manipulate this battle any further, he drew his senses back into the present, returning them sluggishly to scent and sound and touch: incense, afterburners and muscle-tight restraint cords.

His head was an overworked aching lump, his chest prickling with sharp points of acidic pain. The back of his neck, where skin made contact with the crystal lattice of his psychic hood, was, in agonising contrast, almost black with cold.

The powers of the Librarius were many and potent, but not without a cost that was far in excess of any comparable exertions of the body.

'We are coming in over the Nigris Bridge,' Trigaine shouted from the harness nearest to the rear hatch. 'Dropping payload!'

Aravain allowed his awareness to float, watching without the anchor of a physical presence in the moment as *Dark Steed* and her sisters' payload of rad-bombs and virion destroyers fell. A century ago, the Lion's voice had joined the chorus of his brother primarchs in condemning the use of such weapons, and had supported the Emperor in their sanction. Now, the Dark Angels dropped them on an Imperial city with abandon, and Aravain could only watch as His wayward subjects felt such retribution as mankind had not inflicted upon itself in a millennia of war.

'For the Lion, and for Caliban,' he muttered, centring his personality on the repetitious phrases. 'Loyalty and honour. Courage without doubt.'

'Clearing the walls!’ roared Trigaine.

The pulse-pound report of *Dark Steed's* retrofitted beam weaponry rang through the Storm Eagle's fuselage. Staring blankly forward, Aravain threw his senses outwards. The feat was even more difficult to achieve than he had found it before, like trying to squeeze one's face through the bars of a cage. I le persisted, if for no other reason than to assure himself that it could still be done. His empyreal eye manifested over Dark Steed's nose, taking in the spindle-limbed psychic blind spot of a khrave form and the Ironwing forge-wright it was hunched over, seconds before the former was eviscerated by psy-beams. Trained to heed the thoughts of his brothers, his mind touched on Duriel's, his psyche flooding with feelings of bitterness and shame before Dark Steed could sweep him over the battlements.

'Brace for planet fall!' said Trigaine. 'In four... three... two...’

The Storm Eagle touched down with the artistry of an asteroid, and its efficiency, the impact hurling the Knights of Santales against their harness restraints.

'For the Lion!' bellowed Trigaine as the rear hatch blew out. The knights unbuckled, piling down the ramp and into war.

And this was war: visceral, immediate, and bloody.

Aircraft and pieces of fighting machines peppered the esplanade. Lakes of spilt promethium burned, turning the road into a gauntlet of roaring flames, periodically doused by wave uprush before re-igniting. Mortar shells thumped from the castcllaiions of the Vaniskray keep, hundreds every minute, to burst amidst the islet's redans and outbuildings, even as a scrum of Triaros and Dracosan armoured carriers forced its way through the breach in the bridge-fort gate.

The Dark Angels fell back from the wall in stages, using the flames and debris as cover. A Contemptor Dreadnought whose frayed back-banner and personalised heraldry identified him as Telamane Axtyr, Champion of Dorsis Trinary and Right Hand of Thrane, held the breach alongside a cadre of Cataphractii. With a machine-amplified bellow, the venerable ancient punched through the glacis plate of a Chimera, flipping the tank over and demolishing the vehicle's turret. Aravain watched, numb to the horror, as men and walkers and scraps of nightmare worse than both forced a way past the Legion's champions. Human bike units revved their engines, veering around the stalled tanks to screech onto the long, flat road afforded them by

the Uncus esplanade, taking potshots at the retreating legionaries.

'Every warrior here knows his duty,' Trigaine barked as twenty knights of the inner circle of Santales levelled their forbidden arsenal and took aim.

They opened fire.

Nerve induction shredders dropped men like marionettes, purging the brains of their electrical activity with vehemence enough to shatter an empyreal reflection. Gemynd blasters and lucidiron arc rifles attacked the cerebral cortex with the ferocity of a waking nightmare, sheer terror leading the soul to loosen its connection to the mortal spiral. Missiles bearing payloads of asphyx and sinistrum compounds alongside conventional explosives spread desolation and insanity even as they tore bodies asunder.

Every blast punched deeper into the world of the unreal and Aravain felt something scream from beyond its barriers, many voiced but singular in its ability to know pain. Aravain winced, his mental barriers dimming the mortis shriek but unable to mute it entirely.

The weapons of the Santales interfered with the normal patterns of the mind. No mental shield or exercise of Aravain's could block their effects. These were weapons built by the greatest warlord-scientists of humanity's darkest age to the express purpose of overcoming such wards. They obliterated the psychic utterly, further saturating the materium with a null-effect that would take years to dissipate. As a psyker himself, Aravain fell the effects more pronouncedly than his brothers.

Dark Steed lifted off with a howl of thrust before pivoting one hundred and eighty degrees and opening fire with its own upgraded armament. Its twin-linked heavy bolters had been replaced with psionic beam weaponry - the product of an unremembered people built to resist the irresistible. By such artifice had they endured Old Night. Centuries later they had sought then to resist the Dark Angels. The weapons survived.

The heavy guns mowed through khrave and men with equally explosive ease. Still firing, the Storm Eagle banked right, raking the thrall armour with fire, perforating the side of a Dracosan. The ensuing explosions pulped the mortals trapped inside, blasting their warp echoes into instant oblivion.

Aravain advanced on the breach at a walk, dispatching thrall-warriors with headshots until his pistol toned empty. A biker screeched into an impossible turn, evading his brothers' fire, then revved the vehicle's engine loudly and roared towards him.

Aravain drew his force sword.

The battle slowed to a stilted crawl as Aravain forced his mind towards the near future. He gritted his teeth and roared in effort, unable to pierce the psychic caul of the khrave presence.

With a shriek of tyre-rubber on rockcrete the present dragged him back.

Aravain ducked the biker's power maul, and then drove his force sword through the front fork. The mortal rider cried out in surprise as he was sent sailing over the handlebars. His neck bent on impact with the ground, an arm snapped. Even then, khrave domination might have been enough to compel the human back into the fight had Aravain's advancing brothers not gunned him down as he tried to pull a stub pistol from its hip holster.

Aravain extended a hand as a platoon of auxilia thralls in breacher gear poured out from between the vehicle jam around the breach. Electricity spat across his fingertips as he forced his mind's powers into the realm of the real.

With a snarl he splayed his hand and thrust it forward, arcane lightning raking across the rallying troopers. Where the energy touched the soulless matter of breather shields or vehicle armour it passed through without a mark, but on contact with living flesh it burned souls from bodies, the screams of the liberated echoing through the empyrean

'The Lion demands that we stress the khrave's psychic web.' said Trigaine. 'We need to kill something bigger than these thralls if our part in his plan is to be successful.'

Aravain turned to look back.

The courtyard around him was littered with shell casings and scrap ordnance, squads of black-armoured knights hurrying to reinforce this breach or to repel that teleportation strike. A pair of brooding Warhounds dominated the space, fifteen metres high, encased in an incomplete skeleton of aluminium bars, shouts and gunfire reports trilling through their ablative shells. With dulled eyes of mullioned armourglass, *Canis Incaedium* and *Arsia Praedator* glared down the cratered length of the esplanade. Even in their enforced slumber, their princeps untrusted with an implement of war as deadly as a Titan, they were alpha beasts. Their lights were dark, weapons hanging heavy in their mounts, but their very nature was a threat to all who looked upon them, their existence alone enough to bend the logic of the battlefield towards it.

Where they went a man felt compelled to follow, and Aravain could not help but turn to see for himself what their sightless eyes beheld.

A khrave war machine. To describe it as a Titan fell like gross sacrilege, particularly in the shadow of two true god-machines of Mars. But no other frame of reference existed. The mind shrank from the horror of it and grasped for the comfort of the familiar.

It was a Titan.

From orbit, he had felt it, but proximity deadened the senses, the way staring overlong into a candle would bleach an unaugmented man's eyes. Despite its colossal scale it moved as silently as a shadow across a castle wall. Even as he watched its advance, Aravain could not ascertain its mode of locomotion, or even if it truly moved at all. Lascannon beams and tank-busting shells slammed ineffectually against the sheer nonconformity of its existence. It was like watching primitive simians throwing spears at a god.

'You are the Santales.'

Master Duriel strode across the courtyard to greet them, clad in heavily customised war-plate bearing the personalised heraldry of a hexagrammaton master. His armour had suffered in the battle, and Aravain could feel rather than merely see the work of the same breed of claws that had savaged his helmet aboard the *Invincible Reason*. A dozen warriors of the Ironwing escorted him out. firing sporadically as targets presented themselves, but for the most part devoting their energies to shepherding their commander through harm's way.

By the time he and his entourage approached Trigaine and the others, there were close to a hundred Knights of Santales there gathered, deposited by their respective transports.

'We are,' said Trigaine.

'The Lion told me to expect your aid, but not the form that aid would take. Your weapons are impressive.' He glanced back towards the wall. 'Gratitude, I believe, is in order.'

Aravain dipped his head.

'We have the onslaught on the bridge checked for now, brothers, and for the most part our defences are holding' said Duriel, breathlessly. 'Thrall armour continues to push us hard, but it is the khrave themselves who are the real threat.’ Again, Aravain experienced a palpable wave of bitterness and failure from the mind of the iron castellan. 'Nothing but fire or blade

will touch them, and even then... even then they take more to kill than anything so insubstantial has a right to endure. If not for them then I am sure I could hold their slave warriors at bay indefinitely.'

'And what of the Dreadwing?' said Trigaine.

'The khrave have learned to fear their flame, but they have learned it well. The interemptors of the Dreadwing are too few, and the khrave too cunning to manifest where they can be found in force.'

'What of these Warhounds?' said Aravain. 'You cannot let two god-machines stand idle while our brothers perish.'

'I dare not do otherwise,' said Duriel. 'The khrave would twist their princeps' choler against us the moment they were plugged into their cockpits.'

Aravain turned to his preceptor. 'That xenos-controlled Titan must be the psychic foci for a hundred khrave minds. Destroy it and the feedback will undoubtedly shatter their collective overmind more completely than the deaths of a million thralls. That will satisfy our duty to the Lion.'

'Then that is what we will do,' said Trigaine.

'The khrave will fall if you hit them with sufficient force, but that thing?' Duriel shook his head. 'Nothing I have yet brought to bear has even left a mark. I would have pulled my warriors off the road and into the keep to reinforce Redloss and his interemptors but. Lion forgive me, they are all that is slowing it down."

'What can you do to aid us, brother?' Trigaine asked Duriel.

'I will hold this ground for the Lion. Neither man nor khrave will trouble you while I stand.'

Trigaine nodded his thanks, ejecting a spent mindphage canister from his Strife-era proto-shotcannon and slotting another into the breech. 'Knights of Santales, to me. For the Lion, and for Caliban, we go to slay a beast.'

V

The glimmering of the teleportation beams faded, motes of incorporeality bleeding back into the ether from which they had stolen through. Cone were the buttressed walls and lead-jacketed power reservoirs of the teleportariunv In its place was a corridor of such implausible tenuity and length that it seemed to warp the adjoining dimensions of width, depth and time. The

material was of a kind that magos explorators attached to the 2003rd had found all over Maripose and the Vaniskray: cold like metal, pliable like plas-tek, devoid of any colour or reflection as though it existed beneath even the narrowest wavelengths of light. The brief exhalation of teleported air dispersed into the corridor, and in its place a disturbing odour arose from the xenos ship: it was akin to decomposing insect matter and leaf mould, like shrinking oneself to the microscopic and venturing into a spider's nest

The Lion remained where he stood as Holguin, Herodael and the Deathwing Companions spread out to secure the teleportation site. The veteran warriors were avatars of the real in their Tactical Dreadnought plate, anchors of hyper-solidity in a maddeningly pan-dimensional space. The curved plates of gloss-finished ceramite and adamantium were richly embossed and filigreed, oath scrolls affixed with blobs of wax bearing the lion rampant of the primarch's seal. Their long white surplices were specifically tailored to such gargantuan frames, and breathed with the rumbling exhalations of the immense powered suits.

The Lion too had come girded for battle. The Leonine Panoply stood as proof against the khrave ship's temporal contortions. Whether that lay in the artifice of the Emperor or the being of the Lion was unclear. The curved plates of ebon ceramite gleamed like polished jet. Gilt scrollwork glittered more brightly than it had mere moments before aboard the *Invincible Reason*. The forest reliefs seemed to be set more deeply. The sole modification he had made to his raiment was to his cloak, which he had underlain with a thin, psychically dampening etherium plaid that he had personally drawn from the Santales armourium. He wielded the Lion Sword in one hand. The Fusil Actinaeus was drawn, ready, firmly gripped in the other.

A pace ahead, shielding his liege with his own bulk, Holguin surveyed the teleportation site. The action required the complete rotation of his upper body, his helmet so deeply embedded within moulded plates of ceramite and flexsteel rings that it could not move independently of his chest. 'We are aboard one of the khrave ships.' His voice growled, cracked and metallised by his helm's augmitter grille.

The khrave ship,' the Lion corrected. "We have been shadowing it for several hours.'

'I low have they been unaware of us?’

They think too highly of their mental powers. It does not occur to them that their strength might be turned against them, but what my crew does not see, the khrave too do not see.'

It is so quiet,' said Holguin.

'It will not long remain so.'

The lord of the khrave was aboard this ship. The Lion fell it. Ever since his first, stolen insight through Savine's eyes into the Segmentum-spanning collective of the khrave he had fell the presence of their master. The so-called autochthonar. The first. The Ender of Worlds. He felt it still, lodestones pushing against one another, the force of their negative attraction growing ever more irresistible as the distance between them shrank.

He was certain the autochthonar must feel it too.

With senses as attuned to subtle pulls and vibrations as those of a primarch, one could reliably judge the speed, posture and battle readiness of an Imperial vessel, and even the position and distance of the nearest gravity well. Here though there was only silence. If external sources of gravity had any purchase on the matter of the khrave ship then it did not penetrate this deeply into its structure. Whatever arcane force powered the ship's passage through the materium, it was silent and it was still, wholly unknown to the sciences of mankind. To humanity's betterment.

'We destroy the foe by any means possible. Move swiftly and strike hard - let no trick or show of strength delay our judgement now, my sons. Battle has been joined, and there can be no stay of execution. This ends on my blade.' With the instinct of a hunter, the Lion pointed down the corridor. That way.'

The Terminators drew into files, two by two: however the dimensions of the corridors appeared to fluctuate they were never wide enough for three to move abreast. They ordered themselves relative to the Lion even as the primarch strode between them, equal numbers before and behind, lightning claws and storm shields forward, rotor cannons and cyclone launchers to the rear. Holguin and Herodael stayed close to their liege's side. The former wielded a crackling power fist and the brick-like machinery of a combi-bolter. The latter held a Terranic greatsword clasped between two immense gauntlets.

They broke into a run.

Even given the psychic baffling of his own disciplined mind, coupled with

the null-effects of the etherium veil, the Lion knew they would not have long before the khrave became alerted to their presence.

The passage constricted like an intestinal wall. To those at the rear of the column, their brothers ran across the ceiling Sounds trembled through the alien material. Scratching. Gnawing. Muttering. Doggerel gibberish that each warrior's sensorium systems translated into curses and threats to be endlessly recycled across their helmplate displays.

Die. Die. Die. Die. Die.

'Dark Angels,' cried the Lion, and for a moment his raised voice calmed the warp-craft of the xenos ship. 'To arms!'

A gangling khrave-form flopped through the substance of the wall like some manner of pre-term reptile through the shell membrane of an egg. It materialised a third of the way down the Terminator column, rendering a veteran knight and his armour to an organic-base ceramite slush before a blistering return salvo of combi-bolter fire riddled its psy-shield. Ricochets burst against Terminator plate and strange xenos plastics, but the sheer volume of fire was enough to penetrate the psy-shield. Mass-reactive explosions threw off lumps of carapace and brackish haemolymph. The khrave flailed in mute agony, pinned to the wall by the hail of bolter fire until a dousing with lit promethium from a Terminator's heavy flamer finally put it down.

The corridor quivered with the khrave's psychic death shriek.

The Lion drove his Companions on.

From that point forward there would be no respite. Khrave crawled through the walls. They dropped from the ceiling. The ship's very state of matter answered to its masters' abominable collective will. Psychic blasts reduced hulking champions to subatomic particles or soups of glowing plasma. A knight bellowed, unloading his combi-bolter into the floor as tenebrous claws reached up from below to drag him down, the stoic warrior screaming as the ground again became solid with his legs inside.

The Deathwing's answer was as it always was, a hail of automatic fire and righteous flame.

In the midst of every onslaught the Lion was their rock, the steadfast core of every defence and the leading edge of every sally. Where he held fast the khrave's powers wavered and the Deathwing gunned them down. Where he drove forwards they fell before him like moths before a burning torch, the

Lion Sword moved as if it were an extension of his will, the vengeance of Terra given a bladed edge and a killing halo. It severed clawed limbs and eyeless heads. It crunched through exoskeleton and kinetic shields. Khrave warrior forms, all claws and spines and weaponised aggression, swept at him with banshee shrieks and died to the last. Fiery blasts of the Fusil Actinaeus turned those his blade could not reach into glowing ectoplasm. Every death sent a shiver through the invisible web that bonded the xenos and their vessel, every one stoking them to greater heights of ferocity in defence of their nest. His armour had been gouged to bare ceramite. His cloak was torn. His hair fell from its circle! of jewelled ceramite. splotched like oath scrolls to armour with the wax of transhuman blood. But always the Lion pushed on. I le was an unstoppable force, impossible to deflect from his course even as his Companions struggled to match him.

By the time the primarch had carved his way through the xenos hordes, the nearest Companion to him was Herodael, battling the warp claws of a warrior khrave a hundred metres away Or so it looked. Time and distance aboard this ship were mutable, and not to be relied upon.

Alone, he advanced into an ovoid chamber, fudging the vessel solely on its exterior aspect, it might have been the only such feature of note in its entire twenty-kilometre needle-length span. Instinct told him that this was all a vessel of the khrave required. It was enginarium, sensorium, aegis, weapons: the heart of the web from which a sufficiently powerful nexus of minds could be oriented and control all things.

A throne of shadow hovered, unsupported, above the chamber's medial point.

The Lion was a singular being, accustomed to the potency of singular beings. What he sensed from the creature installed upon that throne was not the golden luminosity of the Emperor, nor even the thinly veiled aura of the Crimson King. It was a subcutaneous bleed of warp energy, a bruise under the skin of the materium. It was an abomination that had risen to kingship over abominations.

Holstering the *Fusil Actinaeus*, he took the *Lion Sword* in a two-handed grip.

The lord of the khrave.

The autochthonar.

The xenos lord was cracked and skeletal, mummified by incalculable age

and incredible power. Force enough to flay the souls of ten thousand men crackled unspent across withered carapace. Its enlarged cranium was fringed with backswept horns. A crown of trigonometric shapes and unknowable glyphs sat a centimetre above its sunken brow on a crackling cushion of psychic repulsion. Its face was eyeless, featureless, like metal smoothed by acid, and yet the impression it forced on the eyes of the beholder was of colossal, devastating awareness.

Here, it said, is a feeing that has outlived younger galaxies, and the power of its proclamation overrode even the lion's resolve.

The primarch staggered as the khrave tore into his mind, plundering it of every secret and probing at every point of weakness, inflaming every remembered insult and half-feigned rivalry' into a self-aggravated ulcer in his soul. T his was an entity that predated even the star-empires of old, spawned by evil, a living weapon for the spread of anguish and terror amongst the sentient races. It had learned to reproduce, outlived its long-forgotten creators, and thrived in a galaxy ripe with chaos and strife.

The apogee of humanity's evolution was, it promised, but a footnote in the long gestation of its existence.

The Lion gritted his teeth, tightening his grip on his sword. The autochthonar's mummified husk emitted an arachnoid click as, with strength of will, the Lion slowly forced its tendrils back into its own mind.

Strike off the head and the body would perish. What was true of all creatures was true doubly of the khrave. They were inextricably connected, independent thinking entities but with minds fused into a hierarchy that answered to one being alone.

The autochthonar lifted its shrivelled body from the throne as though drawn upwards by the magnetic attraction of an electrical cloud.

'To the Lion!' bawled Herodael.

A violent shockwave pulsed from the autochthonar's mind. It struck the Lion with the force of a thunder hammer between the eyes. The Lion reeled back The aftershocks were still firing through his skull as Holguin and the Deathwing, breaching the command chamber in his wake, were tossed aside like saplings before an atomic blast.

The chamber's dimensions contracted to a sword's point as the mind of one accustomed to conducting its thoughts across thousands of light years and through billions of minds focused its intellect solely and squarely upon the

Lion. The autochthonar descended through a halo of sparking warp energies. Clawed feet touched the ground. Drawing one age-stiffened limb across its body, it summoned a blade of shivered realspace as, silently as stalking insects, ten, fifteen, then twenty-five warrior khrave leapt through the curtain of ether and into the attack.

VI

The Knights of Santales ran towards the khrave-Titan.

The warriors streamed between crippled and abandoned tanks like an uprushing wave through rocks l ire rippled, popped and cracked. Uncanny beams and projectiles stabbed up at the giant war machine. Missiles and rocket-propelled grenades packed with mind-shredding compounds burst against its wavering form. Its shape bent and contorted like burnt elastic, a tortured whine passing out through the realms of the psychic.

Blood trickled from both of Aravain's nostrils. Hyper coagulants clogged his nose. He breathed through his mouth, the recycled air in his helmet as cold as void ice, and pointed his pistol upwards.

He emptied the magazine with the thoughtless frenzy of a startled huntsman unloading his weapon into the dark. Were he to stop and think he would decry the ludicrosity of assaulting a Titan with a pistol, but it was having an effect. The gun chipped at its physical armour as effectually as if he attacked a glacier with a knife, but he was hitting armour. Somehow, the onslaught of witch-denying firepower from the Saniales had dragged the war machine's form more fully into the corporeal.

The massive wall-guns of the Vaniskray thundered. Neutron lances speared across prismatic skin. Battle cannon shells exploded in psychedelic patterns. The cherry glow of thousands of wall-mounted beam weapons refracted off its multifaceted shell, oranges, yellows and reds splitting off into a thousand beams of infinite black. In spite of its immensity, its emergent solidity, the Titan twisted and squirmed under the battery

Aravain fell into cover. It was a pillbox, a trapezoidal block of prefabricated rockcrete that had been deposited onto an artificial promontory. Mineral-veined lumps of rock armour surrounded it, and a hissing moat of seawater as transient as the waves that delivered it. Aravain reloaded, wincing at the psychic-null touch of the charge cells as he

exposed them. Shaking his head, he looked out onto the esplanade. Two full battle companies of Dark Angels lay strewn over the road, the waves working patiently to line them up into ranks as they dragged the heavy bodies slowly towards the rocks. Divorced from their companies, glitching machine-spirits sought to resist: tanks rolled jerkily backwards, firing fitfully on the roiling Titan. Aravain flinched back into cover as a Deimos-pattern Predator Executioner exploded, a catastrophic overheat ripping its turret-mounted plasma destructor apart in a geyser of crystal-blue plasmic fire.

Waves of disillusionment and dread rolled from the khrave-Titan as it shrugged off the Vaniskray's firepower. Its motions now were unsubtle, moving not in the manner of a dishonoured warrior's shadow but as something planktonic, propelling one limb ahead of itself before oozing after it Aravain fended off its psychic attacks, reaching for the old Northwilds prayers he had memorised as a child, as he watched Brigaine and the rest of the Santales continue their assault. Before him, a stasis missile looped out from behind a wrecked Malcador. It exploded against the Titan's forward tendril. I*he god-engine swayed into the blast, its pedicel forced out of temporal alignment, but continued to advance.

Aravain stepped fully out of cover and emptied another magazine.

A Titan was a god on the battlefield, capable of obliterating entire armies unless opposed by another of its awesome kind. But Titans were not inviolate. They could fall to assault like any super-heavy vehicle or enemy fortress. Access hatches could be blown or forced. Moderaii could be killed. In this task, crack dose-combat troops such as the Legiones Astartes excelled. For this reason, the Imperium's Titan Legions were invariably escorted into battle by huge cohorts of corpus secutarii hoplites.

But the khrave-Titan offered no ports of access that Aravain could discern. If it had what a human princeps would recognise as a crew then it was far from the Sheitansvar, a conclave of unutterably inhuman minds directing their engine of annihilation from the reaches of high orbit.

Aravain continued to fire, those knights who had surged ahead of him now falling back as the near-solid Titan pressed its advance Me looked up as Dark Steed thundered in low from the direction of the ocean. Its twin-linked psionic beamers blasted parallel, hundred-metre-long tracks out of the esplanade before chewing up the Titan's lower anatomy. Trigaine gave

hoarse voice to a cheer as the Storm Eagle rocketed over the Titan's shoulder. The Titan oozed its upper aspect to track it, and contemptuously returned fire. The witchlight of the empyrean seeped through its prismatic armour, and then snapped between it and the Storm Eagle like lightning. The gunship broke apart in mid-air, hitting the sea with a hissing spume.

'Stand your ground!' Trigaine bellowed. 'We bleed this beast in the Lion's name!'

Shots continued to chip at the behemoth s armour, but it had adapted itself to physicality and most of the Vaniskray's fire struck off ephemeral shields. With a grimace. Aravain slammed another burning clip into his pistol.

'*Fall back*,' Muriel voxed.

'What?' said Trigaine.

'*You believe that killing this thing will do damage to the khrave?*'

'The Lion says it and thus it is so.'

'*Then fall back to my position. I am castellan of the Vaniskray and I will see that it is done*.'

VII

Hook-limbed warrior khrave converged on the Lion like bats on wounded prey as he bared his teeth and launched his sword through an electric arc.

The *Lion Sword* cleaved through a psychic illusion. Mockery fluttered through the khrave-host, a sound like the dry rustling of papyrus wings, and a psychic sledgehammer threw him clear across the nexus chamber. The floor was ribbed, foully reminiscent of the digestive tract of an ophidian nightmare, and his armour hanged and scuffed across its surface as he rolled. From supine, he came smoothly up onto one knee, sword angled to catch the incoming blow.

A witchblade materialised in the khrave's hand even as it executed the downstroke. The psychic weapon flashed against the solid artifice of the Emperor's forge-lords. Particles and anti-particles destroyed one another as rapidly as they could be conjured into being as the Lion turned the blow across his shoulder. The khrave went with it. the Lion reversing its captured momentum to rise, turn, spin, and hack open a second warrior khrave with a rising slash.

A third creature lunged at him. The Lion twisted sideways, blade reversing

to flick the blow aside and scrape up the creature's forearm The wounded xenos reeled, stumbling into a stream of bolter fire that chewed it to pieces. War cries and battle oaths rang out, rejoined by the hard bangs of mass reactives as the Deathwing rose to the Lion's need.

The *Lion Sword* whirled and darted like an independent creature, a Calibanite lion guided by his movements and intentions but with a will and an instinct for the kill all its own

A straight vertical chop from on high cracked open the shoulder of a warrior khrave, cutting through to its midriff. A burnt-wasp odour sizzled from the jagged wound. While lacking any of the physical orifices or fleshy organs required to emit sound, the wounded xenos nevertheless delivered a shriek of such psychic potency that it buffeted the forbidding walls of the Lion's mind, force and counter-force rippled through the skin of his face, stunning him long enough for a psychically swollen elder khrave to pin his sword arm in its claws. Another with rondel horns of black crystal studding the upper lip of its pectoral thorax made a simultaneous grab for the opposite arm. The Lion struggled to shake off their grip, the contest fought as much mentally as with physical strength, but the combined might of the two khrave was loo great to be dislodged.

The autochthonar approached with jittering movements, as if through a string of micro-teleportation events rather than inconveniencing its mummified limbs. As it drew nearer, the subordinate khrave faded into darkness, individual shadows banished from sight, if not from true existence, by a total eclipse of the sun.

All except the two that held the Lion.

+I will void your mind. I will force down every morsel of knowledge and personality you possess. And when your empire falls, as every empire has fallen before it, then I will be there to feast on its corpse.+ The xenos ancient reached out. With the sense organs of thought, it lasted the primarch's mind. +Lion El'Jonson+

Before the Lion could respond, the khrave holding on to his right arm exploded into shards of chitin and ichorous spray. Death was so immediate, so unexpected and total, that the khrave did not even have time for a mortis shriek. It simply ended.

With his sword arm free, the Lion turned and plunged the humming artificer blade into the thorax of the rondel-spined khrave to his left. He

looked over his shoulder as the warrior khrave spasmed against the lion Sword's energised embrace.

Stenius strode into the central nexus. The knight of the Ironwing had been outfitted with a psychically baffled helmet of the Santales order, and was flanked by a pair of towering six-limbed cyber automata. Adamantium-clad behemoths of inhuman aspect and devilish asymmetry, the things advanced ahead of the legionary as though directly from the techno-horrified imaginings of Old Night. No blundering automata were these, no cybermantically preserved cadavers spared the final kiss of death. They were Excindios, the last of the dreaded Silica Animus, the bastard offspring of the Men of Iron. Tortured, neutered, once-limitless intellects, they were now chained to a single armoured core and the service of the Emperor of Mankind. Legends of such terrors lived on in the species memory of Old Night and the wars of Unification. The continued existence of such artificial terrors, even in their current mutilated capacity, was a secret kept even from the primarchs and the adepts of Mars, one known only to the Emperor, the Lion and the most exalted ranks of the First Legion's Ironwing.

The Lion sensed the ripples in the ether as the khrave autochthonar unfurled its mind towards them, only to have its thoughts rebuffed by logic processes of copper, silicon and steel.

'You cannot fight what you cannot see,' said the Lion, launching himself at the wizened xenos as the two Excindio automata deployed their weapons.

With the rage of tyrants brought low, of once-infinite beings who had been gagged and blinded and bound in chains, and who had been let slip for this one moment with the tools of murder in their metal hands, they opened fire. Irad cleansers and subatomic pulses whickered through the stunned khrave. Graviton flux projectors shook the resonant plastek of the nexus to its core structure. And, when the destructive energies of even that proscribed arsenal proved insufficient to the slaking of their haired, the behemoths waded in with adamaniium-toothed Evisceratons and stamping feet. Left to their own devices, the shackled AIs would not have limited themselves to the khrave. It was only Stenius' measured guidance, and the finger he held over their artificia kill switch that kept them from rampaging right through the Deathwing and into the Lion.

+Abominations. +

The thought was not one deliberately sent, but a mind as powerful and

permeating as the autochthonar's could not keep its cognition wholly to itself.

A pulse of aggression smashed the Lion into the tangle of ribbed vaults and he rebounded to the floor with a clatter of heavy armour, just as warrior khrave began projecting psy-shields to repel the Excindios' rampage.

But the artificia had already presented enough of a distraction.

'Whatever the foe,' said the Lion, raising his sword. 'Whatever its virtue and its strength. The First Legion alone harbours the means to address and vanquish it. That is our purpose. That is *our* strength.'

The autochthonar's age-withered form seemed to thicken and expand, the rampant energies of its halo hardening into an energy field that flickered with the shearing sound of phantasmal blades, orbiting at the speed of thought. It extended its sword, two metres long, a two-dimensional anomaly speckled with the light of dead stars.

The blade fizzed as the paradoxical force of its unreality touched the energised field of the *Lion Sword*.

VIII

Duriel stood between *Canis Incaedium* and *Arsia Praedator*. The giant war machines were unpowered and immobile, but their bulk made them effective shields against the torrent of incoming fire from the bridge-fort. Ancient Telamane and his cohort of veterans had finally succumbed to weight of numbers and the gate had been fully breached. Battle tanks forced their way through. Bolt rounds spanked off the glacis plates of Leman Russ as they rolled through in single file, hull-mounted heavy bolters barking at the retreating legionaries in return. Human and skitarii soldiers poured in over the walls. The Dark Angels fell back before them. Hefty warriors in Terminator armour acted as bulwarks, but the tide of misguided humanity dragged them under. Shorn of support by the precision strikes of the khrave and the extermination of their reserves by the khrave-Titan, they could not hold.

Duriel's honour guard and remaining consuls fired back. It was like shooting at the sea.

He cut the vox-link to the Knights of Santales to perform one last check on the arcane instrumentations and crude wiring he had strung between the two

god-machines and a cluster of distinctly Dark Age esoterica he had drawn from the Dreadwing arsenal for this purpose. The Warhounds could not fight, but they could still serve. If he listened, tuned out the stuttering bangs and the screams of a bastion put to the sword, and concentrated, he could almost hear the voice of *Arsia Praedator* in his mind. Its deep silica dreams came to him in a fitful Martian cant, a pronounced Phaetonii accent. The technology to which its weapons and power transfer systems had been so cruelly hardwired, however, was blackest Terran and its murmurings spoke of its distress.

Radiological dating placed the technology's origin at between twenty-five and thirty millennia ago, an era when humanity had only begun exploring the arts of species-scale annihilation. Its power had waned over the intervening epoch, but it remained effective, requiring only that which *Canis Incaedium* and *Arsia Praedator* slumbering reactors were able to provide.

An acolyte of Mars would have deemed this gambit sacrilegious, and would not have hesitated in laying down his or her life to prevent Duriel from proceeding.

But Duriel was not a Techmarine. He was a forge-wright, and a master of the Ironwing. He was learned where those of his brethren trained on Mats were not. The Theologiteks of Narodnya had guided his learning, encouraging the accumulation of wisdom rather than lore and of reason rather than dogma. He had studied heretechnika that would be burned on sight on Mars, infernal war machines that consumed the flesh of the slain as fuel, and worse, diabolical engines whose Silica Animus harked back to the blood-soaked legends of prehistory, machines capable of offering divine providence and fortune in battle in exchange for the blood of a willing sacrifice.

This was why the forge-wrights of the Ironwing existed. This was why the Dark Angels existed: to wield the sanction that other warriors dared not.

He turned towards the shouts of fleeing knights. The Santales emerged from the chaos of smoke and spray, the khrave-Titan pursuing them like a primordial horror spewed onto the esplanades from the depths of an alien ocean. The warriors snapped off shots as they ran. Their fire aggravated it.

Most importantly, it kept it solid.

'Redloss. this is Duriel.'

'Redloss.'

'Engage, brother.'

He turned to the Vaniskray. watching as the great gates were cast wide. Scores of warriors, their black ceramite and battle standards emblazoned with the skull-in-hourglass emblem of the Dreadwing sallied forth. They assailed the Titan from its flank like fire-breathing ants, hosing the war engine's lower sections with their flamers. Fire, Duriel bad discovered, was inimical to the khrave. Their shields shrivelled before it. Their bodies burned like any other. He did not know why, and did not need to; it was enough for him to know that it worked. The magnetically pressurised jets of plasma ejected by the weapons of the Dreadwing were flames that burned many times more violently than the hottest star. The Titan screeched, tentacle-limbs dripping even as they extended to drag the behemoth forward. But for all their ferocity. the Dark Angels were still ants just the same. Bolts of psychic power scythed through their ranks. Dreadwing interemptors dropping dead without a mark on their armour.

'Fall back with the Order of Santales,' Duriel voxcd.

'Yes, castellan.'

The surviving Dreadwing lowered their plasma burners and ran, not back towards the safety of the Vaniskray, but further up the esplanade, drawing it on. A handful of Santales knights held their ground to cover the retreat. Uncanny effects striped the Titan's exo-shell, weird crystalline structures materialising from hidden sub layers of the warp under the Santales' fire. The Titan turned the warriors to ash with a brute force psychic lash. Burnt tendrils withdrew into the central mass. Undamaged ones remerged.

Warriors streamed past Duriel and his entourage of knights.

'Keep running,' Duriel shouted to them as they approached, waving them on towards his forces still battling around the bridge-fort. They had done their duty in luring the Titan away from the Vaniskray. They could do more to aid their brothers’ retreat than they could to assist Duriel now. 'Go. Go.'

The khrave-Titan loomed over him. Bits of it flickered. Bits of it burned. Debilitating waves of anger and hate throbbed from its structure like heat from a furnace, liable to burn one who approached too close, liable to kill anyone who ignored that warning. Duriel turned to his warriors. They had all sworn themselves to this duty, as he had. He bowed his head to them as the last of the Dreadwing and the Santales ran past their position, and

smiled.

'We hold this ground for the Lion,’ he said, and pressed the detonator he held in his hand.

* * *

IX

A mushroom plume rose above the crenellated peaks of the Vaniskray, atomic fire blasting the khrave-Titan from its physical form and burning it all the way to its roots in the dark, infinitely malleable soil of the empyrean.

Aravain clung to the armoured skirting of a crippled Land Raider, buffeted by nuclear winds as everything from small stones and unexploded munitions to light tanks were thrown towards the sea. His helmplate was awash with radiological warnings. It hurt to look through them, to see the Titan's true form shrivelling like so much paper in the inferno's heat. He did so anyway.

The atomic, on its own, might not have been sufficient to end the god-machine's infernal life. On some level, Duriel must have intuited this, that the workings of such a weapon derive as much from the man as from the machine. And the spirit of self-sacrifice burned as righteously in the Dark Angels as did the flame of Old Earth.

The searing light went through Aravain's eyes and into his mind. Still, he would not look away. One man needed to remember.

The Imperium could forget. Because the Dark Angels never would.

X

The death of the xenos Titan ran through the khrave's collective psyche like a fire along a trail of promethium. As the Lion had known it would.

Destroy the foe by the most expeditious means possible, beset him as swiftly as he was able, and from every avenue of assault: if the Lion could be said to have a single overarching principle of war then it was this.

The warrior khrave who had survived the nexus battle shrieked, segmented limbs flailing even before the phosphex launchers and heavy flamers of Deathwing Terminators and Excindio artiftcia put them to the torch. The knights took the unexpected moment's respite to reform into defensive

spirals around their liege, taking the chance to reload and recover their breath. The twisted logic of the Excindio, however, had no understanding of mercy or quarter and would grant none, even in error. Streams of arcane fire and hails of quixotic projectiles mowed the khrave down, every shrieking death further fuel for the bonfire of xenos souls that burned across the shrivelling overmind of the autochthonar.

Spasming energies forked across the khrave lord's brittle exo-shell, multiple-jointed limbs twitching beyond conscious control. The flawless geometries of its war-crown bent under the play of energies as its mind sought to corral and contain the enormous psychic feedback that had overridden its body.

'It is possible that the Imperium of my father will one day falter as you insist it must,' said the Lion. Breathing hard from his exertions, he reversed his sword to wield it point down over the spasming body of the khrave, the quillons raised to his eyes. 'As I still draw breath it shall not, and you shall never know.'

Lion El'Jonson drove his sword through the autochthonar's skull.

'Because you sought to pit your strength against the valour of the Dark Angels.'

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ELEVEN

I

Stenius walked

Slanted, metre-thick armourglass viewing panes slid by overhead. The mass of shipping cluttering the Muspellian inner system blocked out the stars of the Northern Fringe. Sorting through the flotsam of the khrave's leaderless armada had been a full-time task, and one that the war-weary Legion had passed down to the Muspellian militia and those units of the 2003rd auxilia who had been spared the worst of the actions on Muspel.

Even now, weeks after the Vaniskray triumph, units of Carribic Jazzerines, Gramarye Castellans and Serranic Peltasts escorted groups of aexactors, numerators and recordists through the ramshackle armada. Stenius did not know what they were looking for. The Orders Civilis, its membership comprised of the civilian and auxilia elements of the Legion, did their work in parallel to the hekatonystika, and largely in secret, reporting ultimately, even if not always directly, to the Lion alone. Stenius had seen reports of several thousand human soldiers and crew bundled into transports for interrogation by the Firewing. Most could be traced back to Crusade fleets

reported lost in the Ghoul Stars. They had surrendered themselves willingly. Many more, however, could have their origins traced to worlds as yet unclaimed or those marked *hominum extinctus* in the ledgers of the Great Crusade - some of them third, fourth or even sixth generation thralls of the khrave. As far as the Lion was concerned this war had ended with the destruction of the khrave and the demise of their lord, but the fighting aboard some of those ships continued to be heavy.

Stenius stepped off the central aisle and into the well-armoured forward section. Lights blinked from steep banks of consoles and displays, reflections gleaming from the dulled plasteel of the palisades. The handful of technical staff on duty drowned in the space. Departmental and sectoral overseers were still taking headcounts, but most estimates placed losses to khrave subversion from the *Invincible Reason's* human complement at around a third. It was a figure replicated by similar tallies throughout the fleet. Those that continued to serve would almost certainly never know what had befallen their former crewmates.

Working his jaw, the las-burn almost completely healed, Stenius strode up to the section chief.

'You requested my presence, lieutenant.’

The officer turned in her chair. Unease crimped her features. The simpler, lazier interpretation was that the woman suffered a flutter of common transhuman-phobia at his approach. But Stenius was a veteran of the First. He saw lies in the plainest motives. He saw lies and was neither surprised nor disappointed when he did. A third of the chairs around her stood empty. They had belonged to people who had been put down by the Legion and no one would tell her why. No memory of the khrave and what they had almost accomplished was to exist, not even in the minds of those who had been there. Such was the order of the Lion.

Stenius would have been suspicious too under those circumstances. But then Stenius was suspicious as a matter of principle.

'Long-range auguries have picked up a translation spike from the Mandeville point, galactic north,’ she said, after only a moment's pause. 'Auto-hails declare her the *Wrath's Descent.*'

'That's Master Alajos' ship.'

'I have an incoming vox-hail waiting, sir.’

'Put him through.'

She pushed a button.

Static buzzed through augmitter pads mounted on bracing columns around the deck. They projected inwards from the four corners, recreating the sense of being at the centre of whatever it was that the system broadcasted. The static subsided but did not disappear altogether. Gifted with acute Space Marine hearing, Stenius was soon able to discern that it was no longer static he was hearing. It was the fragmentary pick-up from a damaged ship. Snarled up in the transmission were sparks, sprinklers, alerting systems. A constant dull whine was almost certainly the sound of an adamantium saw cutting through a collapsed bulkhead.

'Master?' said Stenius. 'This is Stenius. Castellan of the *Invincible Reason*.'

'*This is Alajos*.' The vox-reply was thick with pain indicators, slurred by a cocktail of accelerated healing factors and an extended lack of sleep. '*In command of the Ninth Order. Where is Master Duriel?'*

'A long story.'

'Perhaps one day I will get to hear it.'

'Perhaps,' said Stenius.

'*It was quite the fight we have been through, brother.*'

'Do not allow your warriors to get comfortable. The Lion is already pulling our forces back from Muspel and preparing his ships for departure. The 517th Expedition has been redirected here to restore compliance, and an auxilia garrison can hold what is left of the capital city until they arrive.'

'*I need at least two weeks' layover to conduct repairs on our battle systems*.'

'The Lion has given his orders.'

Alajos sighed. '*We will make ready. Loyalty and honour, brother.*'

'Loyalty and honour.' The master of the Ninth Order cut the transmission.

The section chief signaled for Stenius' attention.

'I have more incoming vox-hails wailing, sir.'

'From the Ninth?'

'No, sir.'

Stenius looked over her head, scanning the officer's entire suite of readouts and diagnostics with a few flicks of the eyes. Several independent battlegroups were in the process of translating in-system, one after the other. Given the vagaries of warp travel and relativistic time in as disturbed a region as the Ghoul Stars, their timing was remarkable. It looked as

though the entire Fourth Expedition Fleet, broken up by the Lion prior to the formation of the 2003rd and the course to Muspel, was returning to muster. Stenius marked from memory the transponder returns that were missing. The majority of those present corresponded to vessels that were battered and burning, limping on minimal drive from the system heliosphere.

He paused, considering the events the Lion had put in play since then, and smiled.

'Sir?' said the chief.

'Answer the nearest ship.'

She reached out and pushed her button.

'Chaplain Nemiel aboard the *Black Talon*, this is Stenius...'

II

It was dark.

The absence was a deeper one than of mere light. It was something fundamental, even spiritual. The shadows had no depth. The bare stone beneath his armoured knees had no texture. The incense bowls and scented candles set up around the rose-shaped chamber performed a jaded dance, their aromas bland and indistinct. The breeze that ruffled the hood drawn over the supplicant's face was barely a physical sensation at all. More like a glimpse of breezes long since deceased. A remembrance of breezes yet to be. Were he to close his eyes, he might find himself upon a high, half-remembered wall, the scent of pine strong, the rustling of dark trees eager.

But his eyes were open. His world was dark. The rustling was not that of trees but of a circle of grim and hooded knights.

He did not know them.

'Where am I?'

'You are back aboard the ship, brother.'

'Were we victorious?'

He did not recall a specific battle, but he remembered there had been one. And he was a warrior. That there had been a battle in his near past felt like a given. He remembered light, a hard, stinging light, a fire that had burned in his mind.

'We are the First,' said the knight nearest to him. His aura was dim. The

echo of his destiny was a whisper on the ghost of a forest breeze. He wore a silver and nacre talisman above his robes. 'We are always victorious, even if no other knows of it but us.'

He looked down. A clean white surplice brushed the flagstones between his bent knees. He was still looking at them as a tall knight stepped through the circle that surrounded him. The warrior affixed a silver laurel to his pauldron. It bore no emblems or words.

He looked up.

'What is this, brother?'

'It is just that the deeds of past heroes be honoured, however dim in the memory their battles have become,' the knight spoke, his voice deep and immediately enthralling. The passage from the Meditations was familiar, but he could not say when or from whom he had first learned it. 'For while men are temporal and destined to be forgotten, their deeds are manifestations of courage, and that lives on in all who follow, so long as one man remembers them.' The supplicant frowned.

He remembered the descent to Muspel. The landing on Uncus. He remembered holding a weapon. He remembered...

'What did I do to earn this honour?'

The knight removed his hood.

'Your duty,' said the Lion.

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IMPERATOR SOMNIUM

'It is a pity that your campaigns kept you from the Triumph,' said the Emperor. 'Your presence was missed by your brothers. Horus in particular spoke to me of his regret.'

'He knows that I would have attended had I been able,' the Lion replied, a tone far sharper than any he had ever before employed in the presence of his father.

'You are troubled,' said the Emperor.

‘The Imperium celebrates, but its Triumph is empty. The galaxy is not won because Horus has his great victory.'

'Recall my words to you - Ullanor is just another victory

'Then why the pageantry?'

'Some men demand such pomp. They cannot accept the end of one era and the commencement of another without an occasion by which to mark it and give it meaning. Laurels must be given, honours and fair titles invented so that they may be bestowed upon favoured generals. Some men need recognition.' The shadows around the Emperor's throne deepened. But beneath the layers of obfuscation, deep within the myriad guises of that singularly unfathomable being, the Lion felt the Emperor behold His firstborn son.

'Some men,' the Emperor continued, 'do not.'

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Guymer is the author of the Primarchs novel *Ferrus Manus: Gorgon of Medusa*, and the Horus Heresy novella *Dreadwing*. His work for Warhammer 40,000 includes *The Eye of Medusa*, *The Voice of Mars* and the Beast Arises novels *Echoes of the Long War* and *The Last Son of Dorn*. For Warhammer Age of Sigmar he has written the novels *Hamilcar: Champion of the Gods* and *The Court of the Blind King*, the audio dramas *The Beasts of Cartha*, *Fist of Mork*, *Fist of Gork*, *Great Red* and *Only the Faithful*. He is also the author of the Gotrek & Felix novels *Slayer*, *Kinslayer* and *City of the Damned* and the Gotrek audio dramas *Realmslayer* and *Realmslayer: Blood of the Old World*. He is a freelance writer and occasional scientist based in the East Riding, and was a finalist in the 2014 David Gemmell Awards for his novel *Headtaker*.

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